

Ways of Fate

by Revanhun

Category: How to Train Your Dragon

Genre: Adventure, Fantasy

Language: English

Status: In-Progress

Published: 2014-01-26 16:43:41

Updated: 2015-01-18 20:44:54

Packaged: 2016-04-26 16:35:28

Rating: T

Chapters: 27

Words: 121,896

Publisher: www.fanfiction.net

Summary: Modern-based, slightly AU approach of HttyD dragons. A story about a Night Fury's life, who has to face some trials quite early, then witness how the rediscovery of dragons by Humanity turns his life upside-down. A story of love, hate, war, peace, happiness and grief, society criticism and occasional wisecracks.

## 1. Beginnings - Prologue

\*\*Disclaimer: I don't own anything HttyD related. Every such thing belongs to their respective owners. This spawn of my imagination is solely for entertainment, not for moneymaking purposes.\*\*

\*\*Have fun!\*\*

\* \* \*

><p>Part One: Beginnings</p>

Prologue

\_November 14th, 2039. Château Gaillard, 95 kilometres northwest of Paris.\_

Silence. No birds chirping, no whiffs of talk, even the wind stopped whistling through the stones of the age-old ruined fortress. Just the plain, dead, and ominous silence; accompanied by the impenetrable fog. Perhaps it's the worst part of the war; the calm before the storm. When all you can do is to wait for the inevitable to happen.

The Night Fury, standing in the top of the ruined bastion in the middle, let out a frustrated sigh. At the same time, a human climbed up on the ladder behind him.

"What's up, Lohengrin?" he asked, sitting down on the parapet. "See anything?"

"\_Nah. Visibility is down to a hundred, even I can't see through this fog. \_" Lohengrin growled, clawing the stone in frustration.

"You seem pretty tense." the man commented.

"\_Something's about to happen, Walt.\_" the dragon replied, and he also sat down, tail curling tightly around his legs. \_"Those bastards aren't going to sit still for long.\_"

"Oh come on, we've been camping on this rock for ten days, nothing has happened so far." Walther tried to calm him, but even he knew his argument was weak. Under them at the courtyard, every soldier was unusually quiet today.

"\_The scouts are coming back.\_" Lohengrin reported, ears perking up as he looked down at the river. Two other Night Furies just climbed out of the water, moving silently towards the crack in the castle wall.

"Let's go find them." Walt said, standing up and looking at Lohengrin questioningly.

"\_Nope, I told you I'm a dragon, not a mule.\_" he stated, and jumped into the air, gliding down elegantly to the ground. Walther just sighed, as he climbed down the ladder to his friend.

Dragons working with humans weren't an unusual sight these days. Everyone thought back in the December of 2012, that the world was coming to an end. They were wrong, the world changed instead. Nobody knew how, but dragons suddenly began appearing, causing upheaval amongst the human population at first. Then, as people realised dragons are sentient beings too, everyone became excited about them. Their intelligence and curiosity drove them towards human cities, many of them ending up as pets or even workers, peacefully integrating into human society. The majority of the dragons however, remained out in the wilderness, living in their own groups, by their own rules. A lot of scientists failed to provide an explanation, where were all the dragons living all those years? According to popular theory, they always had been around us, we just couldn't see them.

Lohengrin and Walt walked towards the two returning dragons. The two noticed them, and then raised their front-right paws to their foreheads, mimicking a human-like salute, definitely a strange sight for the untrained eyes.

"\_Flight Lieutenant Daweryn and Flight Officer Flink requesting permission to report.\_" the female said.

"\_At ease.\_" Lohengrin said, returning the salute and sitting down on his haunches. "\_Go on, Daweryn.\_"

The female let out a worried huff.

"\_Things are looking pretty bad, sir.\_" She began. \_"We saw a lot of fresh mortar emplacements aiming this way, and they're stacking up lots of ammunition. "I think we can expect an assault relatively soon.\_"

Lohengrin looked at the male dragon, who was showing obvious signs of uneasiness.

"\_Got something to add, Flink?"\_

"\_Not much, Boss.\_ He replied. "\_I bet the shit's about to hit the fan in a day. Or less."\_

"\_Phenomenal.\_ murmured Lohengrin, as he got up on all fours. "\_Be sure to get to the mess hall and eat something, then find Walt for recording and filing your report. Dismissed."\_

The two nodded, and walked away towards the main castle building. "Princess and Postman" as everyone else dubbed them, were the most professional pair when it came to slipping behind enemy lines. Daweryn used to be the heiress of a wild Night Fury clan, while Flink worked in the mail service of Switzerland before the war. Lohengrin found it remarkable for someone coming from such a high background, to get along so well with someone coming from quite the opposite, but they were the best working pair together.

"We have to go and report this to Colonel Bryce." Walt said, interrupting Lohengrin's musing.

"\_Yeah, let's get all courteous with The Overlord of Douchebagery himself." \_Lohengrin spat out in despise.

Walt tried mightily to hold back his laughter.

"What do I have to do to make you stop calling him that?"

"\_Unless you can pour some brain into his skull, then forget it. He's the most talentless, retarded\_,\_ lame excuse for a commanding officer I've ever seen, and that's one glorious achievement."\_

\* \* \*

><p>Colonel Frank Bryce was sitting behind his desk, writing something, when he heard a knock on his office's door.</p>

"Sir, Major Lohengrin and Lieutenant Colonel Walther von Hohenfels requesting permission to enter!" the guard shouted.

The colonel let out an irritated sigh.

"Come in."

A Night Fury and a soldier in his mid 30s stepped in, and then saluted to the colonel.

"At ease. What do you want?"

The dragon growled something menacingly, earning a warning poke from his partner.

"Sir," Walther begun "Scouts are reporting a large concentration of enemy artillery pieces and munitions build-up at the other side of the Seine. According to their opinion, this likely means an impending assault, and we're advising to put the garrison into full alert."

"Whose authority was this reconnaissance mission on?"

Walt gulped.

"Members of the 17th Special Recon Company performed the operation, by the orders of Major Lohengrin."

"Do I have to remind you about your orders from High Command?" the colonel asked coldly again, looking at the Night Fury.

The dragon shook his head, and probably rolled his eyes, Bryce wasn't sure.

"Your company is here to provide reinforcements to my garrison. That leaves no room for flying around, especially not unchecked! If you dare to disobey an order once more, you can expect yourself court-martialled along with the rest of your unit. Understood?!"

The dragon shot a killing look at the colonel, and growled again, baring his teeth. Bryce looked at Walt for an explanation.

"Sir, the Major would like to draw your attention to..."

"UAV scans and air recon showed nothing significant! Unless they prove to be unreliable, I'm not willing to give credit to a ragtag bunch of flying reptiles, who..."

Lohengrin stood up and roared furiously at the colonel. Walt jumped in front of him, to prevent the situation escalating any further. Tearing a commanding officer into pieces would surely not look too good on their service records.

"D-dismissed!" The colonel shouted as he stood up from his desk, his chair hitting the wall behind him. On his way out, Lohengrin shot another hateful glare at him.

\* \* \*

><p>"Phew." Walther closed the door behind him, and the pair began to walk down the stairs, to the castle courtyard. "You should really watch your temper..."</p>

"\_My temper?! Brain-dead idiots like that guy cause nothing more than longer casualty lists! Didn't you hear how he spoke about-\_

"I heard everything, but it doesn't mean you can blow up like that." Walt interrupted calmly.

"\_At least you could properly translate what I say.\_Lohengrin growled.

"Hey, I'm a dragon whisperer, not an idiot!" the soldier laughed "If I said only half the things you whinge about out loud, we'd be hanged for sure!"

As they stepped out from the main building, they noticed the rain starting to fall.

"\_How great. Just when I finished scraping the mud from my

scales..."

"I can't believe how vain you are sometimes." Walt teased.

"\_I just attend to my personal hygiene! Unlike some of \_\_\*\*you\*\*\_\_ hairless monkeys!"

Walt laughed at the outburst, and shook his head again. They were walking towards the quarters of their unit. The "Quarters" consisting of piles straw in a building which used to be the castle's stable. Nothing spectacular, but at least it had a roof. Albeit one with a lot of holes, nothing is perfect after all.

"Do you hear that?" Walt asked suddenly. He noticed a sound strangely resembling a giraffe's dying screams...

"\_Spirits, it's Voron trying to sing again..." \_Lohengrin dropped his head resignedly. The dragon's name was actually Zhavoronok, but nobody could say it out loud. So he was either just Voron, or...

"\_LARK!" \_Lohengrin roared out loud \_"IF I HEAR YOU SHRIEKING ONE MORE TIME, YOU'LL BE DIGGING LATRINES FOR A WEEK, UNDERSTOOD?!"

The especially annoying screeching noise ended abruptly.

"\_Yes, sir.\_" came the cheerless reply a few moments later. The soldiers in the courtyard could barely stop guffawing.

"I can't believe he's still trying after all these years..." Walt lamented.

"\_And he isn't showing any signs of improvement.\_" Lohengrin growled  
\_"I swear I could tear his tongue out sometimes, if he wouldn't be so good at his job... Or we wouldn't be so low on manpower.\_"

"Don't be too hard on him, at least he entertains the crowd every time!"

Lohengrin froze in the middle of their walk. His earplates became jittery, breathing tensed, then suddenly his pupils narrowed to slits.

"What... -"

"\_INCOMING!\_"

A shell hit the ground nearby, spraying mud and shrapnel everywhere. Quickly followed by dozens of others, the air became full of the hissing sounds of incoming artillery bombardment. Chaos erupted instantly between the soldiers, everyone shouting and running around, seeking cover.

"\_We have to get everyone to the dugouts!\_" Lohengrin yelled, and started running.

"Get to the trenches immediately!"

One after another, all ten Night Furies came up, and jumped into the nearest dugout. After a huge explosion, Lohengrin saw a soldier

sprawled out in the mud, he had taken shrapnel in the leg. The Night Fury ran over, bit into his uniform and dragged the man to the nearest cover. After they were relatively safe from the drum fire, Lohengrin quickly scanned the area, looking for the rest of his unit.

"\_Boss, come on, get over here!" \_Flink cried out from an other foxhole on the other side of the yard.

Lohengrin probably ran faster than ever before in his life, adrenaline rushing through his veins as he zigzagged over the cratered remains of the courtyard.

"What a stupid way to wage war..." he thought in disgust.

He was only a few dozen metres from Flink and the others, when he got caught by a huge flash of light right beside him. He was momentarily blinded, and felt a terrible burning sensation on the left side of his face, then felt himself becoming incredibly light, as an invisible force picked him up into the air, twisting him around like a leaf in the autumn wind.

His mind quickly fell into darkness, embracing the warmth of utter silence.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Spotted a mistake or something you like? Or just have a question? Review!</em><br>\_\*\*

I

I

I

V

## 2. Beginnings - Chapter 1

Chapter 1.

\_52 years earlier, somewhere in the Ural Mountains\_

The sun was slowly setting behind the sky-scraping mountains. A few clouds dotted the late-spring sky, the warm sunrays reflected brilliantly on the flying Night Fury's black scales. He slowly soared above the wide valley, which was home to dozens of his kind. He wanted to make sure that everything was in good order, taking a watchful look at the forests below him, closely scanning the Y-shaped river to the east, and the high mountains that embraced the valley, for any unusual movement.

Once he finished his last inspection, he slowly began to descend, aiming for his own cave high up the side of the tallest mountain. He slowed himself with a few flap of his wings, elegantly touching down at the opening.

Entering the cave, he was greeted by the sweet sight of his snoozing

mate, an egg cradled between her forepaws. He stopped for a moment to smile, then proceeded silently towards the dragoness. Despite his efforts to be as quiet as possible, her eyes snapped open.

"\_Siegfried.\_ She greeted him drowsily, giving a great big yawn.  
\_"You're home early.\_

"\_Sorry Val, I tried not to wake you upâ€|" \_

"\_Never mind that.\_ Valerien smiled. \_"How was your day?"\_

Siegfried settled down next to his mate, and nuzzled her gently; she could not help but let out a purr of content.

"\_Thankfully it was shorter than usual.\_ he finally whispered sweetly into her ear, with closed eyes. \_"Just the ordinary matters; checking on the hunting parties, sorting out guard duty, marking territory, arguing with the elders, nothing special."\_

"\_No run-ins with the Skrills today?"\_Valerien asked worriedly.

Siegfried noticed her concern, and put his paw on hers, while looking into her pine-green eyes.

"\_Look, dear"\_ he began, with a show of confidence in his voice "\_I told you, I've got them under control. None of the watchers reported any, since we kicked out the trespassers last month.\_"

"\_I know.\_ \_She sighed. \_"I'm just worried that you'll rush out one day andâ€|" \_

"\_I won't do anything stupid.\_ Siegfried stated. \_"I'm trying my best to find a peaceful solution to this, I promise.\_"

"\_What do they want with us in the first place?"\_

"\_Food.\_ he answered simply. \_"They don't have their own territory, so they try to feed in somebody else's.\_"

"\_How disgraceful.\_ \_she murmured,\_ "All they'd have to do is askâ€|" \_

"\_If they would ask, they'd have to accept my limitations on where and what to hunt" \_Siegfried explained \_"It's easier for them if they just try to steal.\_"

They both lay in silence for a few moments.

"\_How was your day?" \_Siegfried asked, displaying quite obviously that he was not interested in delving into the matter of Skrills for any longer.

"\_Oh, I think the little guy stirred inside a few times\_.\_\_"  
\_Valerien smiled, and looked down at the granite-grey egg between her paws. Night Fury eggs usually hatched in seven to ten days after being laid. Their grey shells are littered with black marks, and the pattern of the marks serves as an indication to the future

hatchling's gender. By the looks of it, they can expect a male, an heir to Siegfried's title of protector and leader of his clan.

"\_I can't wait, until he hatches.\_ said Siegfried, glancing proudly at the egg. \_"Finally, a son!"\_

"\_Well, I'm excited, too.\_ Valerien purred. \_"But our little one is certainly taking his time!"\_

\* \* \*

><p>The moon shone brightly down to the vale of Toemnir. Most Night Furies, who didn't have a task for the night, were sound asleep. In Siegfried's cave, the silence was barely disturbed by the snuffing of the two dragons.</p>

Until all of a sudden, a loud cracking noise shattered the silence. Valerien woke up instantly, looking around confused, unsure of what happened. She wanted to check on her precious egg, but, much to her dismay it was no longer between her paws. Rather, it was a few meters away from her, constantly shaking, and providing the source of the cracking sounds.

"\_Sieg!"\_ Valerien tried. \_"Sieg, wake up!"\_

"\_Mmmh..."\_ Siegfried groaned sleepily.

"\_Siegfried, get up!"\_

The loud yell made Siegfried involuntarily jump up and fall to his side, rolling over on the cave floor.

"\_Wha- What's wrong?"\_ he managed, shaking his head to get the sleepiness out from his eyes.

"\_The egg... Look.\_

Siegfried's confused expression slowly turned into one of realization, as his searching eyes found the egg.

"\_Spirits of the Ancestors!"\_ he groaned in a husky voice, eyes widening.

They leaned in close to the egg, not wanting to miss anything. The hatchling inside sounded quite uncomfortable, as he made loud efforts to break the eggshell. After a few minutes of straining, which seemed like an hour to the eagerly awaiting parents, the shell finally shattered, and a tiny black form looped out to the cave floor quite ungracefully for a future clan leader.

None of it mattered though, as the newfound parents set their eyes on their son for the first time, they both swelled in happiness.

"\_Welcome to the world, little one.\_ Valerien said softly, and nuzzled the tiny hatchling, who instantly begun to purr at the touch.

Siegfried stood wordlessly at the sight, head tilting to the side a bit, a smile of relief and happiness beaming on his face. Valerien

curled her paws around the small body of her son, and began to gently clean him from the remains of the egg's interior. The hatchling purred happily, and then hesitantly opened his eyes for the first time.

The sight took both parents by surprise. Night Fury eyes varied in colour, but only from soft yellows to bright lime. They were always a base of green. However their son, who lay before them, had eyes as blue and bright as the summer sky.

"\_Siegfried?" \_Valerien asked with a slight hint of concern in her tone.

"\_I... don't know." \_ he answered, and leaned close to his son, sniffing and examining him closely. The hatchling raised a paw, trying to touch his father's face. The dragon gave a curious look to his son, as he touched him, sniffed him and let out a happy mew.

Siegfried had to smile instantly at the sight, as he stood up and looked to his mate.

"\_I'm sure he's completely fine." \_ He said confidently. \_ "We'll present him to the elders tomorrow, and they will say exactly the same, they'll just dance on our nerves for an unnecessary long time before it, like they usually do." \_He stayed silent for a moment, thinking. \_ "Maybe it means something..." \_

"\_Like what?" \_

"\_I'm not sure. I don't think it's anything bad. I mean, look at him, he's as healthy as a hatchling can possibly be." \_

"\_I agree." \_Valerien chuckled, and held down her son with a paw, because he was constantly trying to bite her toothlessly, demanding something to eat.

"\_I'll go fetch something... No doubt you'll be hungry once you've fed him too." \_ Siegfried smiled.

"\_Mmm, sounds great." \_Valerien nuzzled her mate a goodbye, and glanced at her son, who became more restless in his demand for food.

It's time to regurgitate some fish from yesterday...

\* \* \*

><p>All three of them were in the central cave at the base of the mountain, which served community purposes in the life of Clan Toemnir. This particular cave was big enough to house every member of the clan, and it usually did so, during public announcements for example. The Elders spent most of their time here, providing counsel to anyone who seeks it.</p>

Siegfried was shifting from one leg to another, signs of irritation and impatience radiating from him, towards the old dragon, who thoroughly sniffed and examined his son from every possible angle.

Valerien was as calm as ever, standing still with her chin held high.

Their son was swinging back and forth, as her mother held him by the nape of his neck. His tail instinctively curled up between his tiny hind legs, paws dangled at his side lifelessly, but his current stance couldn't stop him letting out an irritated yowl at the discomfort the aged dragon caused him. A crowd of Furies slowly began to gather around them, looking curious about the newcomer.

After a few long minutes, the elder stepped back and bowed his head to his leader.

"\_Siegfried Valdr, your son is strong and healthy." \_ he announced.

"\_Took you long enough." \_ Siegfried murmured to himself, then said out loud:\_"Thank you for your time, Ragnar Vehn." \_

"\_How shall you name the newborn?" \_Ragnar asked.

Siegfried exchanged a look with his mate, and then answered:

"\_We would like to call him Lohengrin." \_

"\_Ah." \_the elder tasted the word \_"Dancer of Storms in the Old Tongue\_. \_A name of valor and prowess. He will live up to it, I am sure." \_he said, with a polite smile on his face.

After the formalities were done, the crowd instantly gathered around them, to express their gratitude and wish good fortune to the hatchling. Lohengrin wasn't nearly as grateful for the kind words as his parents; he cowered behind his mother's legs the moment he was put down to the cave floor.

Siegfried looked at the passing elder, excused himself from the crowd and darted out to reach him.

"\_May I have another moment of your time, Elder?" \_he asked.

Ragnar turned towards him, and sat down.

"\_But of course, my leader." \_

"\_His eyes." \_Siegfried started, referring to his son. \_"Have you seen anything like it before?" \_

The elder stayed silent for a few seconds.

"\_I am the oldest member of our clan. I have soared the skies for almost five centuries and I have seen a lot of this world, including many inexplicable things. But never a blue eyed Night Fury."\_ Seeing the expression of Siegfried's face, he quickly went on: \_"You may ask the other elders, but they will all share my opinion: You have nothing to be afraid of. Your son shows no signs of unwanted traits. His eyes might be unusual, but a feature like that carries no harm. For what little we know for sure, they might even turn into green as the time passes. If not, maybe it is a sign." \_

"\_A sign of what?" \_Siegfried asked impatiently. He found the elder's

way of speech and urge to overly explain everything slightly annoying.

"\_A sign of being chosen by the higher beings. Maybe it indicates he will have a long, glorious life, bringing peace and prosperity to all of his kin."\_

"\_How do you know..."\_

"\_It is not a matter of knowledge. It is a matter of belief. The ways of fate are unforeseeable. For the present, be content with knowing your son is safe and well.\_"

With these words, elder Ragnar left the worried father alone with his thoughts.

\* \* \*

><p>Siegfried leisurely walked along the grassy bottom of the valley, carrying his son on his back. Lohengrin looked slightly overwhelmed, darting his head with wide eyes to a new direction in every few seconds, his young mind instinctively registering and cataloguing every new sound and sight. After spending the last month entirely in his home cave, the outside world seemed so huge and interesting.</p>

"\_Where do we sleep, Daddy?"\_ he asked.

Siegfried turned to face the tallest mountain nearby.

"\_See that cave high up there?"\_ He asked back, smiling at his son's astonishment.

"\_Uh-huh..."\_

"\_That's where we spend the night."\_

"\_Wow, it just seems like it's so far away..."\_ the hatchling said in amazement.

"\_Just wait until you get bigger, it'll only take a few flaps of your wings."\_ Siegfried chuckled.

He turned his head away, as another dragon came towards him, speaking up in a friendly manner.

"\_Hey, Sieg old buddy, I'd like to... oh."\_ he paused, blinked a few times, and then started again, with a touch of embarrassment in his voice\_. "I mean... May I have a moment of your time, my leader?"\_

Siegfried shook his head in laughter.

"\_Wordy, I've told you hundreds of times so far, you of all dragons don't have to go all formal on me, especially when there's just the two of us!"\_

The newcomer joined to the laughter and sat down in front of them.

"\_I'll never get used to you calling the shots here."\_

"\_Yeah. It's only been... how many years now...? Fifteen so far?"\_ Siegfried asked jokingly.

"\_Heh, some things just never change. For me, you'll always be the guy who..."\_

"\_Let's not go there." \_Siegfried firmly interrupted \_"I don't want the kid to get any ideas."\_

Wordy looked behind his friend's head, and found a very surprised hatchling clinging on his father's neck, staring back at him.

"\_Oh my, lookie who we've got here!" \_he lowered his head, so his eyes were level with the hatchling's, placed his right paw to the left side of his chest, and introduced himself in a friendly tone. \_First Guard Wordren, son of Arengiir is at your service.\_

Lohengrin blinked in surprise, and glanced at his father, who nodded in encouragement. Then, he looked back at the smiling dragon, took a deep breath, and let out all he could muster at the moment.

"\_H-hi."\_

"\_You aren't really into acquaintances today, are you?"\_ Wordren chuckled.

"\_It's his first day out of the cave; go easy on him"\_ Siegfried commented, and then began to grin \_"We should introduce him to your daughter!"\_

"\_Now THAT's entirely out of the question!"\_ Wordren cried out with imitated indignation.

"\_Why?"\_

"\_Because he's YOUR son, that's why!"\_

Both dragons laughed heartily at the outburst.

Lohengrin quickly became bored of the smiling weirdo's chat with his father. He tried to listen, but it just went on and on and on, until he decided he'd had enough. He jumped down from his father's back. As he took a look around he spotted a rather large butterfly, resting on a flat stone a few of steps away from him. He excitedly began to go after it, but he only managed to get a couple of steps before he felt a jerk from his tail, stopping him in instant. Looking back, he saw his father putting a paw to his tail, loosely enough not to hurt, but firmly enough to keep him in place. Lohengrin let out an irritated sigh, and tried to pull his tail out. After a few unsuccessful attempts, he looked up at his father who was still talking to his friend.

"\_Daddy?" \_Lohengrin asked.

Siegfried stopped his conversation, and gave an expecting look to his son.

"\_Can I go and play?"\_

"\_Yes you can..."\_ Siegfried began, moving his paw a bit. Lohengrin tried to escape instantly, only to be yanked back on his haunches once again.

"\_As long as you ask about it at first."\_ Siegfried continued strictly \_"Do not disappear before at least telling someone where you are going."\_

Lohengrin was still waiting to be let loose, and then he figured out that his father wants to hear an approval from him.

"\_Okay, Daddy."\_

"\_Good."\_ Siegfried replied, finally lifting his paw. \_"And stay within earshot, okay?"\_

"\_M'kay!"\_ Lohengrin exclaimed, then started to bounce towards his prey, leaving the two adults back to their business.

The butterfly took off, and began to fly towards the other side of the glade. The young Night Fury tried everything, jumping, flailing his wings around and swinging front paws, but just couldn't catch it. The game went on for a short while, until the butterfly disappeared behind a larger rock. Lohengrin stopped in front of it, thinking. The rock was tall enough so he couldn't see what was directly behind it. Going around would scare the prey off. So the course is obvious â€“ jump over it!

He immediately crouched himself into something that replicated a stalking position. Sticking his claws out and flexing his tiny muscles, he pounced over the boulder, letting out a bellicose roar â€“ or so he thought, it was actually more like a kitten's squeak in mid-air.

And with that happy squeak, he managed to crash himself into another hatchling, who was sitting behind the rock and in front of a shallow puddle, admiring her reflection with the butterfly resting on her left ear. She squealed in surprise as she tumbled into the puddle, spraying water and mud everywhere.

The butterfly flew away without caring of course.

Once Lohengrin managed to get himself together from the crash, he noticed a very angry looking hatchling around his age staring at him, dripping with brown muck.

"\_Umm... Sorry?"\_ he tried.

"\_What the heck are you doing?!"\_ she screamed furiously \_"Are you blind or something?!"\_

"\_Hey, I can't see through rocks!" \_Lohengrin tried to defend himself \_"I was hunting, and you were in my way!"\_

This only made the girl even more upset. She puffed herself up until Lohengrin thought she was going to burst.

"\_Hunting? It's a \_\_\*\*butterfly\*\*\_\_! Why don't you go and-\_"

Lohengrin knew something bad was about to happen, so he decided to end the argument right now. He jumped on her, sending her back to the puddle, then turned around and started to climb up on the boulder, away from danger.

The girl spoke up again, as soon as she managed to spit out the muddy water from her mouth.

"\_If I get hold of you...\_"

"\_You've got to catch me, first!" \_Lohengrin chimed from the top of the rock.

With an irritated groan, she jumped out from the puddle, ran around the boulder causing Lohengrin to turn to the other direction, and started to claw her way up on the rock. Lohengrin tried to flinch back, not wanting to get caught, but his hind legs slipped, making him fall from his place, landing ungracefully with a loud thud and rolling into the same muddy pool which made the young girl so mad.

Once Lohengrin could unfetter himself from the slimy mess he managed to fall into, he found the girl laughing loudly at him from the top of the rock â€“ exactly where he had been a few moments ago.

"\_Very funny.\_"

"\_You should see yourself!" \_the girl exclaimed \_"You look like a frog!"\_

"\_It's not like you look any better!" \_came the riposte, making her cease the laughter immediately.

"\_Oh, really?"\_ she asked threateningly, crouching down and getting herself ready for an appropriate retaliation.

Lohengrin, being unaware of the danger, replied cheerfully:

"\_Yeah, you're so brown, you look more like a pile of-\_"

The girl pounced on him, and both hatchlings began to wrestle in the mud, laughing and thoroughly covering each other with the slime in the process.

It wasn't long before they had to stop, both of them gasping from exhaustion.

"\_That was fun!" \_the girl panted, smiling gleefully.

"\_Yeah, it was!"\_ Lohengrin agreed in a similar manner \_"I'm Lohengrin.\_"

"\_And I'm-\_"

"\_Lyara! Where are you?" \_A distant voice called.

Suddenly, the young girl looked frightened.

"\_Uh-oh. If Daddy sees me like this, I'm toast!\_"

"\_Lohengrin!"\_ Came from another searching voice, in which Lohengrin recognized his father's.

"\_I'm he-\_"

"\_Quiet!"\_ Lyara hissed, shutting Lohengrin's jaw with both of her forepaws.

Lohengrin tried to say something, but he only managed to get out a few muffled sounds.

"\_They'll be mad if they see us this muddy!"\_ Lyara whispered.

Two huge but familiar figures appeared behind them, casting shadow to the two hatchlings.

"\_There you are!"\_ Wordren smiled at first, then as he noticed what's going on, his smile began to fade away, and melting into expression of annoyance instead. Right next to him, Siegfried couldn't help but let out a burst of laughter, sitting down and covering his face with both paws.

"\_By the holy fires of Wotahn!"\_ Wordren cried out \_"I just want to hear one thing. Who started this?"\_

The hatchlings exchanged a glare, and then Lohengrin spoke up guiltily.

"\_Umm... me, sir.\_"

This made Siegfried to laugh even louder, earning an upset glare from his friend.

"\_This is exactly what I talked to you about! He's just as bad as you were!"\_

"\_It's all right Wordy, just some mud. Although, by the way it smells, there might be some p-\_"

"\_I don't care, if I take her home like this, Melyan will flay me alive!" \_

After Siegfried finally ran out of laughter, he stood up and turned to the hatchlings.

"\_Alright kids, how about we make a trip to the riverbank?" \_

The two youngsters cheered loudly.

"\_So you can have a proper bath."\_ Siegfried continued, successfully turning the two youngster's cheers into disappointed groans.

"\_But Daddy!"\_ Lohengrin whined, expressing that he was not fond of his father's idea.

"\_Objection denied."\_ Siegfried said, and began to gently nudge the two tiny dragons towards the direction of the river. \_"You two better

move out now." \_

"\_Race you!" \_ Lyara exclaimed, rushing forward.

"\_Hey! That's not fair, wait up!" \_ Lohengrin cried after her, and began to run too, as fast as his tiny legs could carry him.

As he stared after the two small black spots chasing each other around, Wordren let out a huff.

"\_They've only met each other like half an hour ago, and they are best friends already." \_he said, shaking his head in astonishment.

"\_Did you expect anything else?" \_Siegfried grinned \_"They are \_\_\*\*our\*\*\_\_ kids after all..." \_

\* \* \*

><p>"<em>Come on, Lohengrin."<em>

Siegfried tried to encourage his son towards the water, unfortunately without much success. Despite Lohengrin being eager to explore the world around him, entering an entirely new medium seemed a bit too much for him. Siegfried chuckled as he tried to imagine what his son would do before his first flight.

"\_Look how I do it." \_ he said, and casually walked into the water which was so shallow, it could barely reach half of his leg's height.

"\_But it looks so wet!" \_ Lohengrin whined, as he glanced over to Lyara and Wordy, who were wildly playing around, jumping and splashing each other.

"\_You're going to like it. C'mere." \_ Siegfried smiled, and grabbed him by the nape of his neck, carefully lifting him up and placing him into the water right in front of him.

The hatchling seemed a bit frightened at first, kicking his tiny legs about aimlessly, until the water reached his chest, but his father's caring licks took away his uneasiness.

"\_C'mon, let's play tag!" \_ Siegfried smiled at him.

The short offer cheered up Lohengrin instantly.

"\_Okay! You're it!" \_he exclaimed, and started to wade towards Lyara and Wordren.

"\_If you bounce, it's a lot easier!" \_ Siegfried laughed.

Pretty soon, Lohengrin was jumping around in the water, squealing happily as his father chased him. Lyara and Wordy quickly joined them, resulting in lots of splashing and laughing.

"\_Follow me and swim a bit!" \_ Siegfried said and dived into the deeper reaches of the river. As soon as Lohengrin followed him, his instincts kicked in, telling him to use his tail and fins in an undulating motion to gain speed underwater.

Holding his breath, he darted to and fro, and much to his excitement, there seemed to be a whole different world down there. He quickly spotted his father, hovering and waving his paws at him in an inviting way, so he dashed forward and hooked his tiny claws onto his father's chest. This made both of them to laugh, letting out a stream of pearly bubbles, before Siegfried took him to the surface.

"\_This is so great!"\_ Lohengrin exclaimed happily. \_"Can we dive again?"\_

"\_Sure." \_his father grinned \_"Let's explore the riverbed!"\_

They took a deep breath and submerged again, this time Lohengrin leading the way and dashing towards the bottom while Siegfried swam just a few paces behind him.

The underwater view mesmerised Lohengrin. He especially loved to see how the sun-rays broke at the surface, and softened into broader columns of light. As he swam downwards in an effort to follow the light, he suddenly spotted something glittery at the bottom. With a forceful flap of his tiny wings, he quickly reached it, clamped his forepaws around the object, and kicked himself to the surface.

His head broke the water, and his father's quickly followed. Once they blinked the water out of their eyes, Siegfried curiously spoke up.

"\_What did you find, son?"\_

Lohengrin paced to the shallows, stood on his hind legs, and raised his muddy paws to his father to show the unusual thing he had found.

It was a smooth pebble of a lovely colour blue, dotted with glittering specks as golden as sunlight.

"\_A lazulite!"\_ Siegfried exclaimed in surprise, and smiled at his son warmly \_"A nice catch for sure, Lohen. These things are just as rare as they are beautiful."\_

"\_What is it, what is it?" \_Lyara hurried to them, and stared at the gem with wide open eyes. \_"Oooooh... what will you do with it?"\_

"\_Umm... I dunno."\_ Lohengrin mumbled, marvelling the little stone.

"\_You can take it home and keep it."\_ Wordren commented.

"\_Or, give it to someone as a gift."\_ Siegfried added on too.

Happiness beamed from the hatchling's features, as he found out what should he do.

"\_I'm gonna give it to Mommy!" \_he exclaimed.

"\_That's very nice of you."\_ Siegfried chuckled.

"\_Yeah, I bet he's going to grow up to be quite the charmer.\_ Wordren grinned \_"He'll fly around with a flock of ladies behind him in no time."\_

"\_Now that I'd like to see.\_ Siegfried laughed. "\_Alright Lohen, lets get home and surprise Mommy, shall we?"\_

"\_Sure!"\_

Lohengrin wanted to run all the way home as fast as his tiny legs could carry him, with the gem in his mouth. However, after tripping over a root and almost swallowing it, Siegfried offered him to fly home on his back. Lohengrin quickly leapt on his father's back and they flew to their home cave.

He squirmed impatiently between Siegfried's wings, eager to see his mother's face once he showed her his little gift.

As soon as Siegfried touched down at the entrance of their home, Lohengrin jumped off and tried to rush into the cave, only to be yanked back to his haunches as his father stepped on his tail again.

"\_Hold on a second, young lad.\_ Siegfried smiled at the annoyed expression of his son after he'd put down the gem. He lowered himself, levelling his eyes with his son's. \_"Mommy was out hunting all night. She must be very tired, so she's probably asleep now. Don't rush in like you usually do, let's go inside together quietly, and see if she wakes up. If she doesn't, we'll wait till she does, alright?"\_

"\_Alright.\_ Lohengrin nodded in all seriousness.

They both walked in, to find Valerien lying on the flat boulder they used for a bed. She had curled into a ball, her tailfins covered her face. Lohengrin quietly walked over to his mother's head, and put down the gem in front of her.

Valerien stirred, lifted her fins, and slowly opened her eyes, to be greeted by her son's happy face only a few inches from hers.

"\_Hi Mommy!"\_ Lohengrin rubbed his nose against her face.

"\_Lohengrin..."\_ she purred groggily, returning the nuzzle.

"\_Mommy, look, I brought you a present!"\_ the hatchling gabbled excitedly, and picked up the lazulite from the ground to show it to her.

Valerien's expression turned from weary to joyful in a second. A beautiful smile lit up her features, and she leaned closer to examine it.

"\_We were swimming in the river together with Daddy, when I found it!"\_ Lohengrin gabbled excitedly \_"It's for you, Mommy, I want to give it to you."\_

"\_Oh my..."\_ She whispered, as she carefully curled her paw around the gem. \_"This is beautiful."\_

Lohengrin's ears perked up even more upon hearing his mother's praise.

"\_You like it?"\_

"\_I love it. And I love you too, so very much!"\_

Lohengrin chuckled blissfully, as Valerien curled her other paw around his small frame, lifted him up and hugged him to her chest.

"\_I am going to put it away in a safe place, and keep it forever. And it'll always remind me of you." \_she whispered in his ear.

Siegfried settled down next to his mate with a broad smile on his face, throwing a wing around her back as she cradled their happily purring hatchling between her paws.

"\_Love you, Mommy."\_ Lohengrin purred.

"\_I love you too, my little one..." \_Valerien sighed\_"...I love you too."\_

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Spotted a mistake or something you like? Or just have a question? Review!<em><br>\_\*\*

I

I

I

V

### 3. Beginnings - Chapter 2

Chapter 2.

"\_Siegfried Valdr! Siegfried Valdr, your presence is needed immediately!"\_

Toemnir valley was in chaos. Furies rushed around, some bringing herbs and water, others lighting fires at their designated places in the caves to light the darkness. Curious eyes popped up at cave entrances, some dragons gathered into small groups, whispering about the troubling news they just heard about. Two night patrollers of the clan spotted a group of Skrills, larger than any hunting parties ever encountered. The Skrills had tried to kill them, not wanting to give their presence away, but the two managed to break free, although they had suffered some serious injuries in the process. Siegfried was standing in the centre of the main cavern, becoming more and more furious, as he listened to the blood-covered guard in front of him making his report on the events.

"\_We were caught by surprise. One minute, we were following a pair of them, the next we had to fight for our lives. For every one we

knocked out, two more appeared. I have no idea what they were doing in our territory, but I'm sure they were not hunting. We had no choice but to flee..." \_ the guard said in a tired, defeated voice with his eyes half-closed.

"\_You did the right thing, Salkonyr." \_ Siegfried assured the dragon, who now looked slightly less ashamed. \_"How is Wordren?" \_

"\_He took quite an ugly blow to the neck. It barely missed his main artery. If it had cut it, he'd have bled out by now. Elder Tamaana is tending to his wounds. Aside from the one on his neck, the rest are mostly scratches and bruises- Aargh! \_

Salkonyr suddenly collapsed, letting out a growl of pain.

"\_Salko!" \_ Siegfried cried out worriedly, and jumped over to the dragon who laid on his side, panting violently.

"\_Feels like I have a broken rib..." \_ Salkonyr choked, then moaned again \_"Maybe more...ungh..." \_

"\_Then why haven't you been to Elder Tamaana yet?!" \_ Siegfried scolded him, and bent over to his other side, trying to help him up.

"\_I thought it could wait, Wordren looked much worse..." \_ Salkonyr whispered. He managed to stand up to all fours again, leaning against Siegfried for support.

"\_Damn it Salko, this isn't the time for heroics! You're no use to us dead!" \_

"\_It's not that seriou-\_"

"\_Shut up and let's get you to the elder!" \_ Siegfried interrupted.

As they began to stroll towards the tunnel leading to Elder Tamaana's side cavern which she used to tend to the wounded, Siegfried noticed that Salkonyr also limped badly. There was a nasty bite-mark on Salkonyr's right paw, leaving bloody paw prints on the cave floor as they walked. This only fuelled Siegfried's rage towards the damned Skrills, who nearly caused the death of one of his hatchling-hood friends, and a dutiful clan member.

Elder Tamaana just finished anointing Wordren's neck with a healing salve, made out from different herbs, willow tree bark, saliva and water. She immediately shifted her attention towards Salkonyr's wounds. Siegfried, not wanting to interrupt her in her work with questions, paced towards Wordren, who was lying on his belly at the corner of the cave with his eyes closed. Siegfried could not help but notice the bloodstains on the cave floor, and feel his throat clenching. As he reached Wordren, the battered dragon opened his eyes and looked at him.

"\_Hi, Sieg.\_ he sighed tiredly.

"\_How are you holding up, Wordy?" \_ Siegfried asked with concern.

"\_Been better.\_ Wordren muttered. \_"She said I'll live... doesn't feel like it..."\_ he continued jokingly, pointing his nose towards the elder.

Siegfried sat down in front of him, curling his tail tightly around his legs.

"\_You'd better do! We already concluded that 'bad to the bone troublemakers' like us aren't welcome on the Starpath, don't you remember?\_"

The private joke about dragon heaven they always used to say to each other made Wordren smile weakly.

"\_Sorry, I forgot. But I'll keep it in mind the next time-\_"

"\_There won't be a next time.\_ Siegfried interrupted in a heated tone.

The unusually angered response made Wordren struggle to his feet in realization.

"\_Siegfried, I know what you're planning to do, and it's not-\_"

"\_My duty is to protect my clan against any and all threats, by any means necessary.\_ Siegfried spoke up in a commanding tone, standing on all fours as well.\_"I will do what I must.\_"

"\_Listen to me, I have a very bad feeling about this!" \_Wordren cried out, earning the disturbed looks of everyone else in the cave.\_ "For the sake of your family, do not take unnecessary risks for some false sense of dignity-\_"

"\_Mind your tongue, Wordren!"\_

He sat down, and bowed his head in obedience.

"\_I apologize, my Leader.\_"

"\_You have fulfilled your obligations as First Guard.\_ Siegfried stated in his authoritative voice maintaining a strict expression, which Wordren hated so much\_. "Now I must do the same, as sworn protector and leader of my kin.\_"

With these last words, Siegfried turned around and left the cave. This time he had no choice but to ignore the pleading stare of his best friend, regardless of how wrong it felt to do so.

\* \* \*

><p>Both Lohengrin and Valerien were snuffling quietly in their sleep, unaware of the uproar down in the valley. Valerien cradled her son between her forelegs, resting her head against his tiny chest, causing the hatchling to instinctively curl his forepaws around to hug his mother's face.</p>

Siegfried's ears dropped as he took a sharp breath, and tried to swallow the lump in his throat. He felt terribly conflicted inside, being unsure of what would be the best course of action, which was not something usual for him. Ruining their peace like this and

leaving making his mate worry would be bad, but one should never ever leave their family without at least saying a word. Especially not before an undertaking like this.

He stepped forward, and nudged his mate gently, in hope that he hadn't made the wrong decision.

"\_Siegfried?"\_ Valerien whispered, blinking sleepily \_"Is something wrong?"\_

"\_There was another intrusion. I have to go out to set things right, I'll be back before sunrise."\_

"\_But-\_"

"\_Do not worry, my love." Siegfried nuzzled her in an effort to keep her calm \_"I'm going out with enough guards to obliterate a smaller clan, and I don't even think violence will be necessary. They will just run away, like they always do."\_

Valerian was completely wordless for a few seconds.

"\_Just... just be careful, okay?"\_ she finally managed.

"\_I will, and I'll be back soon." Siegfried stated confidently, then turned around, darted towards the entrance and took off.

Valerien kept staring at the point where her mate so hastily disappeared. She dreaded this very moment since the first time they encountered the Skrills, and now it had eventually come. It felt like she was getting pulled into a nightmare which was slowly turning into reality.

Her depressed thoughts were interrupted by a small, drowsy voice.

"\_Mommy?"\_

Valerien looked down, to notice her son trying his best to examine her worried face from the state of being half-asleep.

"\_Something wrong?"\_ he yawned.

"\_No, there isn't.\_" she said immediately, nuzzling her son and forcing herself not to show away any concern.\_ "Daddy just came by and told me something. Keep snoozing, my little one."\_

"\_M'kay, Mommy." Lohengrin muttered, and turned himself to the other side, throwing his legs around his mother's paw.

Valerien touched her son's back with her chin and purred soothingly, until he was asleep , she continued to stare at the point where Siegfried disappeared. Her fear wiped away all traces of drowsiness from her. She decided to wait until her mate came back.

Time was passing at the pace of a snail, making Valerien more and more restless. The valley below slowly descended into an eerie, malicious silence, matching the oppressing darkness brought by the cloudy night. The air almost reeked of tension and concern, and Valerien couldn't help but find herself constantly thinking about the

worst possible outcome. Accepting the fact that something needed to be done, she picked up her sleeping son by the nape of his neck, paced to the cave entrance and took off. She carefully glided down to the base of the mountain, and stopped in front of another cave, putting her son down on the rocky ground.

"\_Melyan?"\_ she called out.

A few whispers and some rustling came as a response, a few moments later a dragoness appeared in the entrance.

"\_Valerien?"\_ she asked in surprise,\_ "Don't just stand there, come in!"\_

Valerien picked up Lohengrin again and followed Melyan into the cave. Inside, behind the fireplace she could see Wordren lying awake with his sleeping daughter resting closely against him.

When Valerien noticed the ragged looks of the First Guard, she almost dropped her son in shock. She quickly put down the still snoozing hatchling to avoid just that from happening.

"\_Oh, Wordy..."\_ she whispered worriedly. \_"What have you gotten yourself into?"\_

"\_A bloody mess."\_ he groaned hoarsely.

Valerien shook her head at his impossible attempt to degrade the situation.

"\_I have no idea what's going on, and it's driving me mad. I would really appreciate if someone could finally fill me in! Siegfried only stopped in to say goodbye and then left!"\_She said with a pleading look.

Wordren stayed silent for a few seconds and then blinked at his mate.

"\_Could you...?"\_He suggested, with a nod towards his daughter.

"\_Of course."\_ Melyan whispered, and picked up the sleeping hatchling, and took her away to a side-cavern. She came back, walked to Valerien and gestured towards Lohengrin with her head.

"\_Would you like me to-?"\_

"\_Please\_\_\_, \_\_I was just about to ask.\_"Valerien nodded nervously, and watched her as she picked up Lohengrin, being really careful not to wake him up, and carried him to the side-cave, settling him down next to Lyara.

Now that the hatchlings were out of the picture, they could speak more freely. Wordren summed up his run-in with the Skrills, how they were ambushed and how they escaped. During his speech, Melyan laid down next to him, placing her forepaw upon his. Wordren spoke about his conversation with Siegfried, and how he left the valley with three wings of guards.

Valerien was shocked. Leaving somewhere with twenty-one guards backing you up was so unusual, it had probably never happened before.

Siegfried left with almost one third of the clan, and they still hadn't come back...

"\_Something's terribly wrong here..."\_ Valerien choked, with dread clenching her throat. \_"This isn't the usual behaviour of the Skrills. For all we know, they are flying into a trap!"\_

"\_Look, Val.\_" Melyan began in a soothing voice, trying to calm her friend, who was now visibly trembling with fear. \_"We have no reason to assume the worst. Siegfried proved himself of being a more than capable leader during the years, and I'm sure!"\_

"\_No.\_"

Her speech was cut short by the growling of Wordren. He stood up and glanced aside to his mate, who looked slightly angry at him for ruining her effort.

"\_Something fishy's going on. I tried to tell Sieg, but he refused to listen. I'll be damned if I'm willing to stay here while he is out there, flying into the middle of a catastrophe!"\_

This caused Melyan to cry out nervously:

"\_You are NOT going anywhere in this current state of yours! You can barely stand on your feet!"\_

"\_I'm fine.\_" Wordren grumbled. \_"I'll take out another wing of guards and a wing of hunters to reinforce them."\_

This time the reply came from Valerien.

"\_No you won't.\_"

Contrary to her earlier state, now she seemed much more calm and confident as she stood up as well. Her expression was a lot like Siegfried's before he left, and the thought of this made a knot form in Wordren's stomach. He knew exactly what is going to come next.

"\_I am the one who goes out after them. Can I ask you to please take care of my son for the night?"\_

Wordren buried his face into his paws. He may be the First Guard, but it doesn't mean he can order the leader's mate around. The ancient laws of hierarchy directing the life of the clan did not leave any room for opposing the will of a higher-ranking dragon. Wordren felt like there was a war raging inside of his head, where his sense of duty was fighting the care for his friends.

Everything came down to the ultimate conclusion, to the rule which was taught to each and every Night Fury who decided to live as a member of the clan.

The interests of the clan always have to come first.

There was no exception to that rule, and it made Wordren to make the decision, which haunted him for the rest of his life.

"\_Yes. We will.\_" He whispered.

\* \* \*

><p>The roars of dismay and the traces of distant shouting were slowly waking Lohengrin up. He raised his head, eyes half-closed, and groaned in his discontent, missing his mother's usual warm, comforting embrace around him. Struggling with his still blurry vision, he looked around with a strange feeling inside of him. As his sight gradually cleared, he could make out the details of the cave he was in, and it startled him.</p>

He was not at home.

When he noticed the familiar figure of Lyara lying right next to him, he became even more confused.

"\_Lya!"\_ he whispered, nudging the small dragoness to wake her up.

"\_Lyara!"\_ he tried again, after seeing the lack of response.

Lyara could only let out a drowsy grumble. Lohengrin thought out a more efficient way to wake her up, and bit into her ear, with teeth retracted.

The dull pain proved to be just enough for the task.

"\_Ouch! Wha- Lohen?"\_ she asked, blinking her utter surprise \_"What are you doing here?"\_

"\_I don't even know where I am!"\_

"\_Well..."\_ she began, and took a look around \_"We're home..."\_

"\_You mean, your home, right?"\_ Lohengrin asked, just to make it sure.

"\_Uh-huh."\_ Lya nodded and then her ears began to twitch, hearing the unusual sounds from outside. \_"Are we alone?"\_

"\_I dunno, let's take a look."\_ Lohen got up, and proceeded into the larger cave where Lyara and her family used to sleep. Lyara quickly followed him, and both of them walked to the entrance of the cave. Their young minds just could not solve this puzzle. They were put together then left alone, and the valley of Toemnir was now clearly showing some unusual activity. The main source of the voices seemed to be the central cave on the other side, but they could faintly make out silhouettes of other Night Furies sitting in groups, or even running around.

"\_Where are Mommy and Daddy?"\_ Lyara wondered.

"\_Where are \_\_\*\*my \*\*\_\_parents?"\_ Lohengrin asked back in a similar way. With a sudden decision, he stood up and stepped out of the cave, beginning his way to walk down to the valley.

"\_Lohen, wait!"\_ Lyara exclaimed.

"\_For what?"\_

"\_Mommy always told me to wait for her or for Daddy if I wake up alone!" \_She explained \_"I don't think we should try to run around the valley alone, it can be dangerous!"\_

"\_Fine." \_ Lohengrin said out in annoyance. \_"You stay here and wait for your parents. I'll go out and find mine."\_

Lyara looked desperately after her friend, who continued to climb down from the slope. Luckily, Wordren's cave was located much lower than Siegfried's, otherwise such a thing would not be even possible. She waved her tail around and clawed the rock under her paws in discomfort.

"\_Lohengrin!" \_ She called.

"\_What?" \_ came the answer from below.

"\_Wait up!" \_

\* \* \*

><p>Reverberant cries of pain and grief filled the air of the central cave. Wordren tried his best to ignore them, but he just couldn't disregard the red stains on the cave floor, and the metallic stench of blood penetrating his nostrils, no matter how hard he tried. According to Naveron, his direct subordinate as Second Guard of the clan, Siegfried and his group had flown into a trap. The Skrills pretended to ask for a chance to make-peace, but when the Night Furies landed, they went into a ferocious all-out attack. The Furies, being much more capable fighters, slowly turned the tide of the battle when Valerien and her reinforcements showed up, despite still having numerical inferiority. In the end, the Skrills had to flee, leaving their dead and wounded behind.</p>

The wounded Skrills were quickly taken care of, as dragons don't take prisoners.

The elders called it a victory, for the watchers of the clan managed to fight off the enemy, causing a crippling amount of casualties for them. It was crystal clear that the Skrills wouldn't be coming back for many years.

But this so called "victory" came at a terrible price. Thirteen members of the clan gave their lives for it, another ten were severely injured, many of which had been carried home only to take their last breaths with their families.

And now, Wordren was sitting in front a very, very exhausted Elder Tamaana. She looked absolutely drained after tending to so many wounds, hearing out so many last wishes, and trying to comfort so many crying dragons.

"\_And what about Valerien?" \_ Wordren asked.

The aged dragoness just shook her head slowly. She need not to say anything else, her meaning was all too clear.

Wordren shut his eyes to hold his tears back. He swallowed, and asked again in a shaky voice:

"\_Will Siegfried make it?"\_

The brief question only made Elder Tamaana look even more depressed.

"\_He has suffered serious internal and external injuries, and has lost too much blood. I did what was possible to lessen his suffering, but..."\_ she stopped to try to swallow the lump in her throat \_"I can only ease his passing now. His wounds are beyond healing.\_

Her words clattered emptily on the cave floor, and Wordren suddenly felt like he was falling into an abyss of desperation.

"\_May the Spirits of the Ancestors have mercy on his soul..."\_ he whispered quietly.

Suddenly, Melyan rushed out from a short tunnel which leaded to Siegfried's cavern.

"\_Wordy!"\_ she called out \_"He... he wants to see you."\_

Wordren darted towards Siegfried's cave in complete horror. Not a single inch of his body wanted to see his leader and hatchling-hood friend in such a state.

The sight was even worse than his initial expectations. Wordren knew he would never forget this scene for the rest of his life.

Siegfried was lying on his back on a flat stone, which served as a bed. His body literally swarmed with cuts, bite-marks and various types of other bloody wounds. He was covered with the brown salve Elder Tamaana used for Wordren's wounds a few hours earlier; it coated him from head to tail.

"\_Wo-Wordy?"\_ he groaned faintly.

"\_I'm here, Sieg."\_ Wordren sat down, and leaned close to him. His efforts to prevent himself from crying were in vain. Seeing him to struggle for every word was more than disheartening.

"\_Va... Va..."\_ he coughed up some blood, then finally managed to choke out: \_"V-Vale...rien?"\_

Wordren desperately stared at his own forepaws, clawing the rocky surface, being unable to look into his friend's eyes.

"\_I... she..."\_

"\_Wor...dren!"\_

Wordren finally looked up to meet Siegfried's pleading glare. Wordren slowly shook his head, and what happened next caught him off-guard:

Siegfried began to sob. He did not let out a single tear since he was carried and carefully placed down on that rock despite all the terrible pain he must have felt, but now his tears were falling like the autumn rain.

Wordren carefully wrapped his forelegs around his best friend's broad neck, and hugged Siegfried's face against his chest.

After a few long minutes, Siegfried tried to speak again.

"\_Wordy..."\_ he sighed.

"\_Hmm?"\_

Siegfried suddenly grabbed Wordren's head with both of his forepaws, and looked directly into his eyes.

"\_You... You take care of Lohengrin..."\_ he started coughing again, splattering droplets of blood to the ground.

"\_Of course, Sieg. I will raise him as my own, and do everything I can for him." \_Wordren vowed, staring deeply into his friends' eyes.

Siegfried slowly let him go, and slumped back to the stone. Then suddenly both of them heard startled cries coming from the main cave.

"\_Who let them in here?!"\_ someone asked.

"\_Where's Mommy and Daddy?!"\_ a very young voice demanded.

"\_Lohengrin!"\_ Siegfried called out with all of his remaining strength, almost rising up from his bed.

"\_Daddy!"\_ came the shocked response, then an angered cry:\_ "Let me go!"\_

Wordren rushed to the tunnel, to see both Lohengrin and Lyara being held down by Melyan's paws. Lyara only looked very frightened, but Lohengrin was desperately struggling to claw his way out from Melyan's grip.

"\_L-Let him...come to me..." \_Siegfried muttered weakly.

Melyan heard the leader's words, and let the little hatchling loose. Then she picked up Lyara, and walked away, with tears rolling down her cheeks.

Lohengrin rushed past Wordren, but stopped in shock after seeing his father.

"\_Daddy!"\_ he screamed \_"Daddy, you're hurt!"\_ He ran to his father in utter despair, and started to lick his face intently, as if his small tongue could wash away all the wounds.

Siegfried rolled to his belly, lowered himself and raised his foreleg to gently press his wailing son against his forehead. Lohengrin threw his legs around his father's face, not wanting to let him go.

"\_My little son...I-I'm so sorry..."\_ Siegfried mumbled softly, and looked straight into his son's blue gaze, who was now panting violently, his small chest rising and falling rapidly. \_"Stay

strong... p-promise me you'll stay strong... and never look back." Siegfried mustered up a weak smile "I know you will make Mommy and Daddy proud..."

Siegfried's voice slowly died away, his foreleg slipping from Lohengrin's back to his side while his eyes slowly shut.

"\_Daddy?" Lohengrin tried, eyes growing wide in horror. There was no response, his father never talked to him again, ever...

He suddenly felt a jaw tightening around his neck, lifting him up. He flailed his legs around, desperately clawing the air, not wanting to be separated from his father. The dragon who was pulling him away, ignored his cries.

"\_NO! He's just asleep!" \_He clawed at the face tearing him away from his father\_, "He's justâ€ noâ€ NO!"

Wordren held his head up high, to be safe from the wailing hatchling's attacks, and began to slowly walk away from Siegfried.

\* \* \*

><p>A few days later, in the hours of midnight, the whole of Clan Toemnir gathered together at the centre of the valley. The moon shone brightly, so there were only a few bonfires lit by the dragons who had prepared for the ritual of Parting.</p>

The gathering dragons formed a circle; inside the circle were seventeen piles of wood, placed deliberately to form a crescent. On each pile, there lay a body of a dead dragon.

Wordren thoroughly described the ritual to Lohengrin. He told him how the scales of the dragons, which protected them from fire, became combustible after a while. He told him why the crescent form is needed to resemble the Moon, and described how the bodies are moved with utmost respect, and positioned on their back with wings spread wide, and nose pointing towards the sky. He told him how important this is, to let the dead's soul leave the body and soar up to the Starpath above them.

However Lohengrin couldn't care less about any of it. In fact, he felt like he will never care about anything, anymore. He barely noticed Elder Ragnar stepping up, and starting to speak.

"\_Bound brothers and sisters of Clan Toemnir. We have gathered together because of a very rare and unfortunate occasion. This rarity only makes it even more painful, as it is gripping our hearts, and splattering our tears of deepest sorrow. We are here to part ways from\_ \_many \_\_of our family and friends\_\_; \_\_all\_\_ of \_\_them \_\_were valiant enough not to hesitate \_\_in\_\_ sacrificing their own lives to ensure the safety and future of our clan. They have all made our ancestors proud that day, as they fought off an enemy with such ferocity and might only a true Eifrah, a true Night Fury can muster\_. \_Their names will be remembered with honest gratitude, and their memories will live forever in the hearts of their beloved. Let their actions serve as an example to everyone who draws breath: for as long as we have champions like them in our proud ranks, our clan will blossom forever. Our loss is terrible, but we will endure, just like we endured all the hardships of the past eras. Our loss is terrible;

but we must let our heroes pass away, and allow them to soar together with the Spirits of our Ancestors on the Starpath."\_\_

As soon as he stopped, seventeen guards began to step towards each of the piles. Once they got there, they slowly blew fire to the wood, stepped back and flapped their wings ceremoniously, to allow the fire to grow.

Lohengrin sat silently between Wordren's front legs, watching his parents' bodies being consumed by the fire. He felt completely empty inside. He didn't let a single tear fall, almost as if he ran out of them completely in the last days. He could only feel a deep, echoing hole in the fabric of his very soul, occupying the place where formerly his parents were. He felt so entirely alone...

His thoughts were interrupted by a paw brushing gently against his side.

"\_You're not alone Lohengrin.\_" Wordren said softly, like he could hear the hatchling's thoughts\_ "Never forget that."\_

Lohengrin didn't reply. He only leaned against Wordren's leg for whatever little comfort he could find.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Spotted a mistake or something you like? Or just have a question? Review!<em><br>\_\*\*

I

I

I

V

#### 4. Beginnings - Chapter 3

Chapter 3.

The air was cool in the early hours of the morning. The sky above was cloudy, murky and dark grey, as if it wanted to match the mood of Wordren. He sighed tiredly and leapt out from his home. He glided down to the valley, touched down at the entrance to the central cave and proceeded inside, becoming increasingly nervous with every step forward, not wanting to take part in the upcoming conversation.

With one final, uneasy sigh, he began to go through the network of tunnels. His destination was located deep inside of the mountain. It was a huge, half-circle shaped delve, where the Council of Elders resided, now taking care of the matters which normally belonged to-

He interrupted his thoughts right here. It happened only a month ago, the memory of dire loss was still far too vivid.

He could faintly hear the murmurs of the elders as he entered their domain. Everyone became silent as he sat down, and looked to the

whole council. They were sitting on a higher ridge of the cave wall, which it made the dragon on the floor raise his head up, practically forcing him to admit their authority.

After a few moments of tense silence, Elder Ragnar spoke up.

"First Guard Wordren, son of Arengiir." his voice echoed through the hall "We have summoned you here, to inform you about the decisions which have been made regarding the unfortunate events of the last month."

Wordren took a sharp breath, now looking straight ahead.

"I will accept your judgement, honoured Vehnek." he said calmly. Facing the inevitable, his earlier nervousness was swept away. He had been sitting there for two minutes so far, and he'd already had enough of the elders' time-consuming and overly formal way of acting, which â€"by his opinion- usually never led anywhere. This would never happen if-

"Firstly," Ragnar interrupted his thoughts "after closely examining the case and hearing out any and all witnesses, we deem that you shall not be held responsible for any of those events, for you have fulfilled all your obligations as First Guard."

This made Wordren's throat clench.

"Honoured Vehnek!" he spoke up, addressing the whole council "In light of the recent events, I'd like to ask for my exemption from guard duty, and forfeit my title and position of First Guard."

Now all the elders seemed to be surprised. Elder Ragnar scratched his throat to quiet the distracted murmurs, and looked straight into Wordren's eyes.

"You have worked conscientiously over the last decade to earn your title, Wordren. Are you sure that this is what you want?"

"I am." Wordren replied without hesitation. "I'd like to recommend Second Guard Naveron to take my place. I strongly believe that he possesses all the necessary skills and knowledge to be successful."

The elders exchanged a few glances with each other, and quietly discussed Wordren's announcement. Once they reached their conclusion, they all looked to Ragnar.

"We accept your decision; you now stand relieved from guard service." Ragnar announced "Your future role in the clan, as well as the possible candidates for taking your place will be discussed at another time."

"Of course, go ahead and waste some more time, like usual." Wordren whispered bitterly to himself, staring at his own forelegs.

"The second subject of this meeting" Ragnar continued "is to discuss the future of the former leader's heir."

Wordren snapped up his head, looking at the council again with wide eyes. He clawed the floor in his anxiety.

"\_This council is a temporary solution to substitute the clan's leadership. For the future of the clan, and to preserve our leaders' illustrious bloodline, it is imperative to ensure the hatchling's healthy progression. For these reasons, we decided to entrust you and your mate with the upbringing of Lohengrin, son of Siegfried, in line with the former leader's last wish..."\_

Wordren let out a huff of relief.

"\_...until he reaches the age of fifteen winters."\_

"\_What?!"\_ Wordren cried out in indignation. \_"And then? What the hell do you want to do with a youngling halfway into adulthood?!"\_

"\_Mind your place, Wordren!"\_ Elder Ragnar growled, waving his tail in his disapproval.

Wordren snapped his eyes shut, and gave and apologetic nod towards him. After a few moments of silence, the Elder continued.

"\_His further training will be performed by Elder Zorhen, separated from the rest of the clan."\_

"\_Elder... Zorhen?!"\_ Wordren shouted, unable to restrain himself as he stood up to all fours, \_"He's completely-"\_

Ragnar strictly interrupted him.

"\_Regardless of what your opinion is about Elder Zorhen, and regardless of how caring of a father you may be, you simply do not own the necessary knowledge a leader must possess. Under normal circumstances, Lohengrin could have learnt everything he needs from his father. Since that option is not available anymore, we are forced to find a less favourable alternative."\_ He explained.

Wordren sat back with a defeated sigh. He knew that he can't extort anything else from the elders.

"\_I will comply with your orders.\_"

\* \* \*

><p>Back in Wordren's home, things were much more peaceful since Lyara was done with her usual morning bath. Now she was making considerable efforts to catch and chew on her mother's tail, which she kept waving around lazily. Melyan occasionally smacked her daughter lightly on her nose, just to keep teasing her, while she held Lohengrin in her paws, cleaning him with long strokes of her tongue.</p>

Contrary to Lyara's earlier hysteria about the bath, which also happened to be quite normal for a hatchling of their age, Lohengrin was completely passive, and rather listless.

A large figure appeared at the entrance of the cave, and began to smile at the sight.

"\_Daddy!\_" Lyara exclaimed happily, and ran to her father to nuzzle

his leg.

"\_Hey there, Sunshine!"\_ Wordren smiled warmly at his daughter and lowered his head to let her to climb on. Then he walked over to Melyan, with his daughter wagging back and forth, curling her tail around his neck.

"\_Just a minute, we're almost done here." \_Melyan said lightly and continued to bathe the hatchling between her forelegs.

Wordren lowered his head and nuzzled Lohengrin.

"\_Hi Wordy."\_ Lohengrin mumbled.

"\_How are you holding up, little guy?"\_ Wordren asked softly.

"\_I'm fine."\_

The not so keen answer drew a worrying look to Wordren's face. He was about to say something, when Melyan spoke up.

"\_All right, we're done." \_she smiled after a last lick, and nuzzled Lohengrin gently.\_"You took it very nicely, unlike a certain little dragoness..."\_ She gave a teasing glare to her daughter.

Lyara rolled her eyes, and jumped off from her father.

"\_Can we go out now, and play?"\_She asked excitedly.

"\_Sure you can!"\_ Melyan smiled at her. \_"Just stay within eyesight of the cave."\_

"\_Okay!"\_ Lyara replied. She paced towards the entrance, then suddenly stopped and looked back at Lohengrin.

"\_Are you coming?"\_

"\_No." \_Lohengrin murmured. \_"I think I'll go and sleep."\_

He walked to the side cave which he shared with Lyara, and disappeared inside. Lyara took a rueful look at him, and then ran out.

Wordren watched the whole scene sadly, and settled down at the side of his mate.

"\_How did the audience go?"\_ Melyan asked curiously.

"\_It wasn't too bad."\_ Wordy replied \_"They decided to let the kid stay here for a while."\_

"\_For a while?"\_

"\_After his fifteenth winter, an elder will take him to teach him the things he has to know about leading the clan."\_

"\_Which elder knows anything about that?"\_ she asked in her disbelief.

"\_Zorhen."\_

"\_Who?!" \_Melyan burst out \_"That senile... Dragons call him Crazorhen for a reason!"\_

"\_Look, we barely know him." \_Wordren cut in \_"In fact, nobody really knows him, that's why there is all that bad gossip behind his back. And there's nothing I could do about it. We have to accept this, whether we like it or not."\_

"\_I suppose you're right." \_she replied in a calmer manner. \_"Have they told you anything else?"\_

"\_Well... they figured out that I'm innocent..."\_

"\_And it only took them a month to see the obvious. How typical.\_"

"\_So I resigned.\_"

"\_You did WHAT?! Worden... for the love of the Spirits, why?" \_Melyan asked in her disbelief.

Wordren gulped, trying to swallow the lump in his throat. He was avoiding his mate's questioning glare.

"\_Because I've failed, that's why. I should have been there, fighting together with the others. Instead, I wallowed around at home because I was careless enough to take that stupid blow to my neck.\_" He explained bitterly, with eyes shut.

Melyan touched the face of her trembling mate with her forehead comfortingly.

"\_Wordy.\_" she began softly \_"You should not blame yourself. Siegfried gave you the order to stay here. He also said that you did what you could. Since then, everyone else admitted that you did what you could under the given circumstances. I know that Siegfried and you were like brothers to each other, but I also know that he would probably kick your butt now, if he could see you blaming yourself like this.\_"

Wordren stayed silent for a few moments, and let out a depressed sigh.

"\_I guess you're right. But I'm not going to change my mind now. I don't want to be in that position, ever again.\_"

"\_But you used to like guard duty..."\_

"\_Yeah, when I was a rookie, and could always use my night patrol time to sneak out with you for a little... stargazing.\_" Wordren gave a nostalgic smile, twinkling at his mate mischievously.

"\_Oh, yes.\_" \_Melyan blushed, giggling like an adolescent \_"Stargazing it was..."\_

They both laughed and nuzzled each other lovingly. Wordren turned himself to rub his mate's forehead with his chin.

"\_Yeah, those were the days.\_" he continued nostalgically \_"Now we're

all old..."\_

"\_Hey!"\_

"\_...and wrinkly..."\_

"\_Hey!"\_

"\_...and grumpy..."\_

"\_Wordren!"\_

"\_What?" \_Wordy asked innocently "\_I'm not talking about you; you're just getting more beautiful with each passing year!"\_

"\_You cheeky bastard!" \_Melyan laughed out, and bumped her head into Wordren's shoulder.

\* \* \*

><p>Lyara watched her parents' departure from home carefully, in the cover of a hawthorn bush. As soon as they were out of sight, she began to climb her way up to the cave, and crept inside. Tiptoeing to the cavity where she and Lohengrin used to sleep, her eyes scanned around for the other hatchling.<p>

Lohengrin lay flat on the rocky surface. He was sound asleep, occasionally mumbling something in his dream, flexing a paw or a tailfin every now and then.

She stopped, looking at her friend worriedly. She has spent a lot of time coming up with her plan, but now she was a bit unsure about the whole matter. Back before the incident with the Skrills, Lohengrin was always cheerful, inquisitive, and a lot of fun to play with. Since then, he had barely left the cave at all, he never played with anyone and he was disturbingly quiet and restrictive.

Even with her young mind, Lyara quickly figured out that her friend and now adopted sibling was still under the effect of his parents' sudden passing, and seemed to be unable to handle it alone. The solution for this problem proved to be elusive for her, and she was becoming more and more desperate about the well-being of Lohengrin. She talked about it with her father, her mother, and even a few older dragons in private, but nobody could come up with a straight answer.

In the end, she concluded that desperate times needed desperate measures.

With a sudden boost of certainty, her head swung forward, biting into Lohengrin's tail and began to pull him out from the cave, trailing him towards the entrance.

At first, Lohengrin didn't feel a thing. He drowsily opened his eyes more or less successfully, and slowly figured that he was moving backwards. Blinking rapidly, he gradually realized that someone was pulling his tail, he turned his head only to find Lyara dragging him around.

"\_Hey!"\_ he snapped angrily "\_"What are you doing?!"\_

Lyara let his tail go, and looked into his eyes firmly.

"\_I'm getting you out."\_

"\_But I don't want to!" \_He protested in irritation.

"\_Like it or not, you're coming with me!"\_

Lohengrin shook his head. \_"Forget it."\_

"\_NO!" \_Lyara yelled at him \_"You're haven't done anything but mope around and sleep in this cave for weeks! You're my little brother now, and I'm not going to let you stay here and turn into a Dust Fury!\_"

"\_What? Little brother?!" \_Lohengrin burst out \_"I'm older than you!"\_

"\_Really, by how much? Two days? I was here first, I call the shots here!"\_

"\_No you don't!"\_

"\_Prove it!" \_Lyara said teasingly, giving him a playful look, descending herself into a pouncing position \_"Wrestle. By the big aspen, down in the valley."\_

"\_Why don't you just go and-\_

"\_Are you afraid?"\_

Now that did it. Lohengrin growled in his frustration, getting on all fours, glaring at Lyara menacingly. She began to bounce up and down, chiming in her most annoying tone.

"\_You're afraid! You're afraid! You're afraid!  
You're...\_"

"\_RAWR!\_"

Lyara quickly swirled around to make a run for the old tree, with Lohengrin rushing after her, shouting various threats about what will happen if he ever get a hold of her.

The two hatchlings ran down the valley, the one on the front laughing loudly, while the one behind continuously shouted his nonsense, earning curious glances from other dragons. The tree they were heading for was a couple hundred metres away, but it seemed much less thanks to its sheer size. That certain white aspen was centuries old, and older dragons always considered it as a respectable living memento of persistent growth and flourishing.

The hatchlings considered it to be the best possible playground in the area, shown by the significant amounts of claw-marks left on its bark over the past centuries.

Lyara hastily reached the bole of the tree, and then turned around, only to be pounced upon by Lohengrin. She landed on her back, Lohengrin being on top of her. Lohengrin was about to say something,

when both of them heard an excited scream from the greenery above them:

"\_Pile up!"\_

With that, another hatchling landed on top of them, tittering happily, in the process sweeping a few thinner sprigs, leaves and vast amounts of white barks into the pile.

"\_Faelynn!" \_Lohengrin moaned under her \_"Get off me!"\_

He barely finished his sentence when another three hatchlings reached them, happily jumping to the top of the pile, which was becoming more unstable with every second. Lohengrin tried to stand up from Lyara's grasp, but the crowd on top of him proved to be too heavy, and as the pile began to lean, his legs buckled. The younglings clung to each other tightly as the pile began to fall over, all Lohengrin could do was to grab Lyara, pulling her with the others along in a great ball of scales. Giggling and squeaking happily, the hatchlings tumbled over and rolled down from the slope until they eventually came to a stop. The whole bunch laughed from the bottoms of their young hearts, while they tried to untie their tangled limbs.

"\_Yuck! Stop drooling all over me!"\_

"\_Gee, you guys weigh a ton..."\_

"\_Get out from my mouth, you taste like fish... Wait!"\_

Unable to hold it in anymore, Lohengrin began to laugh as well, finally joining the others.

\* \* \*

><p>Hours later, Wordren was on his way home, escorted by the last rays of the sun, which was about to disappear behind the mountains. He was slightly disgruntled that his hunt wasn't as successful as he originally anticipated. Upon his arrival to the cave entrance, Melyan rushed out to meet him.</p>

"\_Come!"\_ she said with sparkling eyes \_"You have to see this!"\_

Wordren followed his excited mate to the cave, heading straight to the hatchlings' nest.

Inside, Lohengrin and Lyara were snoring in unison, with Lohengrin lying on his side while Lyara was lying across him with her wings unfolded lazily around them.

"\_They were outside, playing at the Great Tree the whole day..."\_ Melyan explained, and leaned against her mate.

Wordren chuckled, and hugged Melyan tightly to himself with his wing.

"\_It's so good to see him finally recovering..."\_ he sighed, staring at the two little dragons like he couldn't get enough of the scene.

\* \* \*

><p>Wordren was right; after that day when Lyara had so cleverly lured Lohengrin into her trap, he did show signs of getting better. He still wasn't as playful or excited as before, but he gradually loosened up, he was regularly spending time with the other hatchlings now.</p>

The real breakthrough came at an especially cold winter day. The whole family was walking their way up a rocky path, leading to a wide plateau located on the top of one of the mountains, which encircled Toemnir valley.

The last year brought some significant changes to the two youngling's bodies. They were still barely four feet long from nose to tail but they had become a lot more bulky, especially in their shoulder muscles. Their wings were not useless, overweight sheets of flesh without much purpose anymore. Yet still they continued to grow at a considerable rate, though they still had trouble wading through the deep layers of snow, which were sometimes more than three feet thick. That didn't stop them from having lots of fun, bouncing around the pure-white blanket which turned the already known and familiar landscape into an entirely new one, but Wordren and Melyan ended up carrying them, they didn't want the younglings to waste all of their energy before getting to the main event of the day.

"\_What exactly are we going to do?"\_ Lohengrin asked curiously, while he clung onto Melyan's back.

"\_You'll find it out once we get there."\_ Worden turned his head back and smiled mischievously \_"I'm sure both of you will like it a lot."\_-

When they finally reached the plateau, the hatchlings were let loose to admire the sight. There were a few other families on the hilltop as well, gathering at the edges, staring down and giving encouraging advice occasionally.

But the hatchlings were not with them, and as Lohengrin was struck with the realization, he stopped and looked up to Wordren.

"\_Are we...?"\_-

"\_Yes, you're going to fly today."\_-

"\_AWESOME!"\_ Lyara screamed, unable to hold back her eagerness. She and Lohengrin quickly ran to the edge of the cliff and stared down. Way down below, there were a few other Night Furies standing and waiting for the hatchlings to come, ready to intervene if something were to go wrong. Above them, there were a few young dragons soaring, still flapping clumsily and being shaky at their turns, but they were flying nonetheless. This all seemed very exciting, but when Lohengrin noticed how high they were compared to the ones at the bottom, he started to feel a bit uneasy.

The two parents caught up with them, Wordren instantly lowered himself down, and began to explain a few things.

"\_What you are basically going to do, is to dive downwards, then open your wings to let the wind carry you at first. Your main wings are

generating the lift that will keep you in the air. To control where you want to fly, you have to use both sets of tailfins, spreading them and tilting them in the appropriate direction. Your bodies already know most of this; the basics of flight are in our instincts. When you're feeling like you're going to fall, flap your wings. If you feel like you're losing control, let the ones down there to catch you."—

"\_And what if I can't fly at all?" \_Lohengrin asked worriedly.

"\_You can always try it again.\_" Melyan said, smiling at him "It's not a shame at all if you aren't successful for the first time."\_ she looked up at Wordren "\_Wordy will show you how it's done."—

Wordren grinned widely like a youngling, and stepped to the edge of the cliff. He crouched down, flexed his muscles and threw himself off the edge. The two hatchlings leaned over to see him spiralling down, then opening his wings wide, which turned his fall into a rapid climb, and he finished off by doing a loop and landing gracefully behind them with a few strong flaps to slow himself down.

"\_Sorry, I couldn't resist..." \_he chuckled.

"\_Show-off!" \_Melyan assessed, and patted him lightly on his forehead with her tail, causing him to giggle guiltily even more.

"\_Now. "\_She said, turning back to the two hatchlings—"Who would like to go first?"—

"\_Me! ME!" \_Lyara exclaimed, eagerly jumping all around.

Lohengrin just frowned at her, and looked nervously down to the valley again.

"\_Alright, alright!" \_Melyan giggled—"Get into position, and when you're ready, jump."—

Lyara readied herself at the edge of the cliff, tail waving left and right in excitement. She grinned widely, slowly opened her wings, and flung herself forward. Lohengrin watched in amazement, as she dived a few dozen feet, opened her wings which almost instantaneously levelled her flight, and began to distance herself away from them. The wind carried back her excited screams, as she slowly started to spiral downwards, gently gliding towards the bottom of the valley, aiming for the dragons below her.

"\_This is so amazing!" \_she laughed.—"See me from up there?"—

"\_Way to go, Sunshine!" \_Wordren exclaimed, and took a proud look around, to show off how content he was with his dear daughter's progress.

Melyan chuckled upon seeing her mate's swaggering, and lowered her head to Lohengrin's.

"\_It's your turn now." \_she said encouragingly.

Lohengrin's blue eyes grew wide in fear, as he looked down to the depth below him again, and looked back to his step-mother's smiling face.

"\_Umm... how about tomorrow?" \_he asked in an unusually high voice.

"\_Oh come on, Lohengrin..."\_ Melyan chucked and nudged the youngling gently with her nose.

"\_Wait! I...I mean, it's kinda cold right now, and the wind's tricky, and... have you seen how high we are? How about I try it at first from Wordy's back, or..."\_

Melyan and Wordy exchanged a meaningful glare, and then Wordren slowly stepped behind Lohengrin, who continued his babbling undisturbedly.

"...\_or let me climb up a tree or something, or..."\_

Wordy placed a paw at his back, and with a forceful swipe, he pushed Lohengrin off from the cliff, sending the shocked youngling downwards, flailing and screaming in horror.

"\_WHAAAAAAAHHAHAAA-\_"

"\_Your wings!" \_Wordren shouted after him \_"Use your wings!"\_

Lohengrin forcefully opened his wings, which stopped his swirling and stabilised his descent, now diving faster and faster. With a sudden flash of thought, he tilted his tailfins upwards, and then...

He flew. His earlier dread turned into happiness as he realized flying isn't hard at all, and how joyful it is! Suddenly he felt dozens of new sensations, ones like never before, like how his wingtips told him about the currents of the wind, how sharply cold and refreshing the air was around him, how the wind caressed his scaly hide. He became so excited that he made a decision to push his limits, to see how far he can go without getting into trouble. Tilting his head and tailfins upwards, he turned the levelled glide into a leisure climb. As he noticed his gradual deceleration, he flapped his wings, joyfully realizing he's gaining both speed and altitude. With a subtle twist of his tail, he made a turn, and then dived away a bit to get some more speed. He utterly enjoyed how the wind blew through his sensitive earflaps and how every detail around him became slightly blurry as he became faster. To avoid getting near to the ground, he began to climb again.

Every dragon down at the valley and up at the plateau watched his performance with amazement.

Lohengrin began to laugh happily. It was like something just clicked into the right place inside him, he left all his negative feelings back at the cliff. He felt as light as a feather, and most importantly, absolutely carefree.

\* \* \*

><p>It was late at night, when the family reached the comfort of the home cave. Wordren carried a huge pile of deadwood in his mouth; he walked next to the shallow, dragon-made hole in the rocky floor and

dropped his burden into it. With the same movement, he blew fire at it as well, creating some warmth which his family could enjoy for the rest of the night, replacing the silent darkness with dancing flames.<p>

Lyara travelled on her mother's back, with legs limply hanging down at her sides, looking completely exhausted from the day's events.

On the other hand, Lohengrin speedily flew into the cave, doing wide circles around the fire. He hadn't touched the ground once, since he was thrown off from the cliff.

"\_Lohengrin!" \_ Wordren said in a warning tone \_"I've told you not to fly inside the cave-\_"

"\_But why?" \_Lohengrin whined, looking at him directly. In that moment, he slammed himself into the cave wall, slid to the floor and ended up resting upside down in the corner, with his tailfins dangling next to his head.

"\_That's why." \_Wordy chuckled, and walked towards the cross-eyed youngling. He lifted Lohengrin by the tail and gently carried him next to the fire, where Melyan was already lying and bathing Lyara. She was so sleepy that she forgot to protest about the whole thing completely.

"\_Alright." \_Wordren said \_"You'll have a bath, then you're off to sleep!\_"

"\_A bath?!" \_came the desperate response \_"Oh come on, Wordy...\_"

The sudden outburst made Worden laugh out loudly. There was still hope for the kid, after all.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Spotted a mistake or something you like? Or just have a question? Review!<em><br>\_\*\*

I

I

I

V

## 5. Beginnings - Chapter 4

Chapter 4.

\_13 years later...\_

The moon's face shone brightly on the surface of a small lake in the middle of the forest, its beams giving a soft, silvery light to the surroundings. Ripples began to appear on the water, as a young doe on the shore started to quench her thirst. She was alone, separated from her herd after the sky had darkness cast over its surface not too

long ago. She had run as fast as she could to avoid the supposed danger, and after a while, she decided to stop and drink a little, upon seeing the friendly lake.

She finished with the drinking, and was about to move on again, when suddenly a loud, purple-blue explosion raked the ground right next to her. Completely in panic, she instinctively began to run in the opposite direction...

Exactly from that way, a Night Fury appeared in a steep dive, crashing right into her. It happened in a fraction of a second: the doe tried to struggle, but the dragon had its legs curling tightly around her in a deadly hug, and closed its jaw around her neck with overwhelming strength.

A few loud rustles and a cracking sound later, Lohengrin stood tiredly but proudly by the corpse of his prey. He gave himself a few moments to catch his breath, and scan the area for any potential movement.

Another Night Fury silently stepped out of the forest. She was almost twice his size, and by the looks on her face, she wasn't as content with the younger dragon's performance.

"\_You're still trying to hunt from the air."\_ she assessed in a slightly berating tone.

Lohengrin let out a guilty smile, ears flicking backwards against his head.

"\_C'mon Ohrana, you know I'm not really good at stalking..."\_

"\_And you will never be, if you don't practice."\_she said in a slightly rebuking manner \_"This time you've had some success, but you can't hunt in a forest from the air. Not to mention, the light flashes and explosions are anything but subtle, you alert the whole area about your presence."\_

Lohengrin dropped his head so she couldn't see him rolling his eyes. The hunt instructor was right, as always, but it was hard to admit such a thing.

"\_You must not take unnecessary risks during a hunt." \_Ohrana explained further \_"One day you'll have to do your part in providing for the clan. An injured hunter is not too useful, and you're risking serious wounds every time you dive into the forest. You have to be much more careful, and plan your approach accordingly."\_

"\_I guess you're right..."\_ Lohengrin sighed. \_"I'll try a bit harder next time." \_

"\_Good." \_Ohrana nodded, then looked at the doe" \_Let's carry your prey back to the clearing, and see how it went for the others!"\_

Without further words, Lohengrin grabbed the doe with his jaw, and took off to follow the huntress. They flew to the east for a couple of minutes, and then landed at a clearing, where other dragons of Lohengrin's age were gathering into a half-circle.

Everyone looked eager to show their results to the older huntress. When Lohengrin noticed Lyara standing proudly over a full-grown stag, he took a look at his own pitiful doe and sighed in frustration.

"\_Let's see." \_Ohrana said, and began to walk to her nearest pupil.  
\_"Faelynn?" \_

The young dragoness puffed her chest.

"\_Lyara and I cornered this deer, and took it down together." \_

"\_Teamwork!" \_Ohrana exclaimed \_"Very nice. I can't stress enough the benefits of having someone to back you up. Flying in pairs is five times more efficient and ten times safer. I'll make sure to note your parents about your progress." \_

Lyara and Faelynn exchanged a victorious grin with each other, while Ohrana walked to the next dragon.

"\_What do you have for us, Garenald?" \_

The dragon showed boar to his instructor.

"\_The bastard put up quite a fight, but in the end I proved him to that I'm right..." \_ he grinned, obviously looking proud at himself.

"\_Handy work, taking down a boar all alone while you're not fully grown." \_Ohrana commented. \_"Do I see burns on its hide?" \_

"\_Umm, yeah." \_Garenald admitted \_"I had to use my fire to keep him at bay..." \_

"\_That is all right, if you check your aim. Even a boar isn't too nourishing if you blow it into pieces first... Nevertheless, good job." \_

"\_Thank you." \_Garenald bowed.

Ohrana walked on, stopping in front of a dragon who seemed to be a bit chuffed, and couldn't stop himself from frowning painfully.

"\_What's wrong Altarem?" \_

"\_Nothing." \_he mumbled \_"Just had too many... bleh." \_

And with that, he started to gag. He made disturbing retching sounds, and started to drop fishes out from his mouth to in front of him. One after another, it grew into a pile, and the whole procedure lasted for about ten minutes. Ohrana sat calmly next to him, counting the catch. The others chuckled and shook their heads in disbelief.

"\_Umbleeerrgh..." \_Altarem finished, and glared up to his mentor, now looking clearly sick.

"\_Forty-two. I'd say it's impressive, but as you surely feel now,

carrying this many fish isn't really practical. You've managed to put quite a stress to your stomach, make sure to visit Elder Tamaana this night. She'll give you a root or something to chew on and calm your belly down. \_

"\_Okay." \_Altarem groaned weakly.

Ohrana stood up and addressed everyone around.

"\_All right, group, tonight's hunt is over. Leave the prey here, Macharon's hunting party will arrive soon and bring them home for proper distribution. Good night everybody, we'll continue in a few days."\_

The younglings said their goodbyes, and began preparing for the trip home, chatting about their experiences. Lyara playfully bumped into Lohengrin's shoulder.

"\_What's wrong, Fancy Flight?" \_she asked gleefully \_"You don't look too happy!"\_

"\_Nothing." \_Lohengrin answered moodily, and turned towards Altarem. \_"Hey, Al, are you sure don't need a wing to get back home?"\_

"\_Nah, thanks Lohen, but I'll be okay."\_ he replied, mustering up a weak smile.

Lohengrin turned back to Lyara.

"\_I just thought I'm doing pretty well, but Ohrana showed up and proved me wrong. Again. Then I saw what you've caught..."\_

"\_Oh come on, you can't be the best at everything! This is my revenge for you out-flying me by a mile yesterday. And it's quite a nice rabbit you've caught, you shouldn't b\_e disappointed\_ with it."\_ She grinned.

"\_It's actually a doe, Lyara." \_Lohengrin corrected her, and began to smile teasingly \_"Now that you've mentioned it, how about a race to home? The loser cleans the fireplace tomorrow morning!"\_

Lyara stood silent for a second. And then she began to smile as well, unable to resist the temptation.

"\_Okay!" \_She laughed, and immediately took off.

Lohengrin gave her ten seconds of vantage, and then headed after her with a sly grin on his face.

Lyara flew as fast as she could, almost at treetop level. She looked back over her shoulder, but couldn't see Lohengrin. As she raced towards the entrance of the valley, she became more and more confident about her victory, when suddenly a blurry black form came from high above, brushing her surprised face with a wingtip, hopping right ahead of her. Flying almost two times faster than her from his dive, Lohengrin did a confident barrel-roll in front of Lyara as he gained more and more distance from her.

"\_HOW THE F-\_" Lyara roared in her disappointment, but the wind drowned out her insults from Lohengrin's ears.

He just laughed heartily, as he did a loop in the air, purely for the sake of being more annoying before zooming away.

\* \* \*

><p>By the time Lyara reached their home cave, she'd found a very bored-looking Lohengrin sitting at the entrance.</p>

"\_Finally, I was about to fall asleep."\_ he yawned.

"\_Very funny."\_ Lyara pouted and bumped into him on her way past, causing him to chuckle at her annoyance.

"\_Hey, let's make a deal."\_ he said "\_Tomorrow we'll go out together, and I'll show you a few tricks, if you teach me how to sneak around like you do.\_"

"\_Hmm. I might consider it. Or not!" \_Lyara smiled, then pointed her nose up and marched into the cave, as she gave her best to look very much offended.

Upon entering the cave, they saw Melyan, Wordy and another dragon sitting around the fireplace, having a conversation with their voices down. The unknown Night Fury seemed to be really old, with a raspy voice, and scaly hide dotted with grey spots, but his sheer size was impressive. He looked like he was even bigger than Wordren, who was quite well-built thanks to his decade long service with the Guards.

The elder dragon turned his head and spotted the two adolescents staring at him. He turned back to Wordren, and spoke up:

"\_You will explain the situation to him, so he can make his decision tonight.\_"

Wordren let out an angered huff, disliking the tone of the elder.

"\_As you wish.\_" he growled nonetheless.

"\_I shall be on my way then." \_The older dragon replied and he walked out of the cave. As he passed the two young dragons, he gave an inquisitive glance at Lohengrin.

The family inside watched the elder's departure. As soon as he disappeared, Lohengrin asked:

"\_Oookay, what was that about?"\_

Melyan glared at Wordren, who sighed tiredly.

"\_I have to speak with you in private, Lohen.\_"

"\_What's going on?" \_Lyara demanded.

"\_Come here my dear, and I'll tell you." \_Melyan offered to her. Lyara gave a last, worried glance to her father and Lohengrin, and then joined her mother in the side-cave.

"\_Let's head out." \_Wordren gestured with his head, and they walked out from the cave, settling down in front of the entrance.

After a few moments of uneasy silence, Lohengrin became curious.

"\_So? What's with that elder?" he asked.

Wordren sighed again.

"\_He's here to take you away, to the Shalnar ridges far in the north. Shortly after your parents... I- I wanted to convince the Council to let you stay with us. I made a promise to your father that I'll take good care of you. They gave in, but only until you'd reach fifteen." \_

"\_But... why? What do they want from me?" \_

"\_They want you to take your father's place, and be the clan's next leader." \_Wordren explained \_"From what I understand from all of this, leaders are supposed to know a bunch of things which are restricted to the others for some reason. Elder Zorhen came here to inform you that your time with us is coming to an end, and he wants to take you away and teach you." \_

"\_So..." \_ Lohengrin began after a few seconds \_"I was never meant to stay with you forever-" \_

Wordren interrupted him, sounding defensive.

"\_Lohengrin, I've kept this away from you because I wanted to give you the hatchlinghood you deserve. If I would have told you before, you'd fear this day for years. I tried arguing with them, and- " \_

"\_Wordy. It's fine." \_ Lohengrin said calmly. After his initial surprise, he felt a strange sense of acceptance. Somewhere deep inside, he had always suspected that his father's legacy would come up one day. And looking at the nervous dragon in front of him, who did every possible thing he could to make him happy, despite not being his own son, his heart suddenly swelled with gratitude.

"\_You...you and Melyan did everything you could to replace my parents." \_he said, struggling a bit to find the words \_"And I'm very grateful for it. I always will be. But... if it is my duty to become the leader of the clan, I'm not going to try to avoid it." \_ He pointed his head up to look straight into Wordren's eyes. \_"I'll do what is expected from me, and make all of you proud." \_

This drew a smile of relief to Wordren's face.

"\_If your parents could see you now, they'd be really proud of you. And believe me, I know. I knew your father like the back of my paw. He had the same kind of firmness when things started to get serious..." \_

"\_Really?" \_ Lohengrin asked curiously.

"\_You bet!" \_Wordren stated, then he began to laugh, \_"Although he

wasn't always like that. When we were young, he just couldn't sit still for five seconds. He was always on his way to play pranks or generally annoy anyone he could find. Mostly your mother." -

"\_I bet she loved that..." \_Lohengrin smirked.

"\_Oh, absolutely!" \_Wordren's glare trailed off towards the sky, a goofy, nostalgic grin beaming on his face. "\_Valerien was always easy to piss off. Spirits, how many times I've heard her yelling at Siegfried... But of course, as the years passed, Sieg slowly began to take things more seriously, and he completely stopped being a cheeky bastard over time, which your mother valued greatly. But when he was young, he was always causing trouble, together with his all-time assistant." -

"\_Let me guess: it was you!" \_Lohengrin said, joining Wordren's laughter.

"\_Yeah, you're right. We were terrible." \_Wordy admitted. "\_But I have to say I'm glad that you and Lyara are much more manageable than we were." -

Their laughter slowly died off, and Wordren noticed how late it was that night.

"\_Let's get inside and get some sleep, shall we?" -

"\_Go ahead.\_" Lohengrin answered "\_I'd like to stay out for a bit, if you don't mind." -

"'\_Course not. See you in the morning." -

"\_Good night, Wordy." -

Lohengrin watched Wordren going into the cave, then settled down and raised his gaze to the stars above him. He couldn't help but feel melancholic. Tomorrow he would leave the place where he spent all of his previous life, possibly for quite a long time. It might even take years. Although he was curious about what would happen after he joined the elder, part of him felt sad about the farewells of tomorrow.

\* \* \*

><p>As the skies slowly began to fade from the deep blue into pink, and the first rays of the sun caressed his face, Lohengrin's eyes snapped open instantly. Looking around, he realized he must have fallen asleep right where he'd sat with Wordren.</p>

The memories of yesterday night's discussion came to his mind, causing him to sigh as he stood up and walked back into the cave. He expected the others to be asleep, but much to his surprise, Melyan was awake, pacing back and forth in her nervousness. Wordren must've been with a hunting party, only Lyara seemed to be asleep, but Lohengrin couldn't see her, she was in her side cave.

"\_Lohengrin!" \_Melyan exclaimed, and hurried to him "\_Wordy told me about your decision. I've wanted to go and catch something for you for breakfast..." -

"\_It's all right, I'm not hungry at all-\_

"\_It's an outrage he has to take you while you're so young! Why couldn't he wait a couple years more? Oh Lohen, be sure to always keep yourself clean, especially behind your ears...\_"

"\_Melyan..." \_ Lohengrin smiled, trying to interrupt.

"\_... never eat anything that smells like eel..."\_

"\_Melyan!"\_

"\_...never fly where the wolves howl..."\_

In an effort to keep Melyan from stressing out herself completely, Lohengrin stepped forward, pressed his forehead against hers and nuzzled her, resting his chin on the back of her neck. He wanted to tell lots of things to her with this, and she seemed to get the message. She quieted down, and gave a motherly lick to him.

"\_Thank you. For... everything." \_Lohengrin whispered.

Melyan let out a shaky sigh.

"\_I should really start to admit that you're not a hatchling anymore."\_

"\_Yeah. Probably." \_Lohengrin smirked\_. "Is Lyra still asleep?"\_

Melyan took a step back, and turned her head towards the side-cave.

"\_I don't think so... Lyara!"\_ she called \_"Don't you want to come out?"\_

No answer came, and Melyan took a worried look at Lohengrin.

"\_She didn't take the news about you too well..."\_

"\_I'll handle her." \_Lohengrin said confidently, and walked into the smaller cave. It was connected to the main one with a short L-shaped tunnel, which made it perfect for younger dragons who wished for a bit of privacy.

Lyara was at the back of her cave, curled into a ball and showed her back towards the tunnel dismissively. Lohengrin stopped a few steps from her, and quietly spoke up.

"\_Lyra? You okay?"\_

"\_No." \_she grumbled, refusing to look at him.

Lohengrin sat down next to her, and curled his tail tightly around his legs.

"\_Look."\_ he began calmly \_"I know this isn't..."\_

"\_This isn't fair!" \_she snapped, and made a sound which closely

resembled a sniff.

"\_Hey, you're not crying, are you?" \_Lohengrin asked in surprise, and leaned closer to her.

"\_Of course not!"\_ She said angrily, wiping her face with a violently quick swipe, sitting up whilst doing so. \_"I just... my eyes sometimes... umm... when you wake up, y'know?" \_She awkwardly blurted out.

"\_Oh... right.\_ Lohengrin left her at that. \_"I know this isn't what we've wanted, but I have do this, for everyone's sake. They are all counting on me, to be the clan leader one day."\_

"\_Right, but... couldn't you just stay somewhere closer?" \_Lyara asked.

"\_I'm afraid I don't really have much of a choice.\_"

"\_But... I'm going to miss you..." \_she whispered and stepped forward to snuggle at Lohengrin, burying her face into the scales of his neck.

To say that Lohengrin was not expecting such a display of affection, would be a huge understatement. Once he regained his senses, he gave a sad sigh, and gently stroked the top of her head with his chin.

"\_I... I'm really going to miss you too, but \_I'll be back one day, Lyara, we're the best of friends after all. These things will just... work themselves out.\_"

"\_Promise?" \_Lyara murmured.

"\_Promise.\_"

"\_Okay. Let's go out.\_" she sighed, looking a bit less depressed than before.

The two walked out to meet Melyan, when Wordren walked into the cave.

"\_I've arranged everything else with Zorhen." \_he announced, and sat down next to his mate. \_"He will be waiting for you at the Great Tree.\_" he continued, looking at Lohengrin.

Lohengrin gulped.

"\_I should be going, then...\_"

"\_You watch out for yourself out there, kiddo." \_Wordren said in a caring tone.

Lohengrin just nodded, gave the three dragons a grateful smile and walked out of the cave. He was afraid that should he spend one more minute with them, he wouldn't be able to leave.

\* \* \*

><p>Elder Zorhen sat under the ancient aspen, eyes closed and

enjoying the warm rays of the rising sun. Lohengrin landed a few steps away from him, but stopped right there. He wasn't sure about disturbing the old Night Fury in his meditation of some sort, so he just sat down and stayed silent.<p>

Minutes crawled by at the pace of a snail, and Lohengrin had to forcefully keep himself calm. He was restless, curious, slightly afraid and excited, a huge variety of different emotions swirled inside him, but he was determined to not show a thing. He wanted to give a good first impression to his soon-to-be mentor.

About half an hour later, Zorhen slowly opened his eyes.

"\_You have shown some ability to restrain yourself and keep your anxiety at bay, which is promising. Are you ready to depart?"\_

"\_I'd like to ask a question, if you don't mind." \_Lohengrin replied, his voice sounding slightly hoarse after the long silence.

Zorhen looked into his eyes. Lohengrin felt like he was staring into an immeasurably deep emerald lake, filled with memories and experiences refined by centuries of age.

"\_You may ask, but only once." \_he said in such a stern and powerful tone that made Lohengrin shiver. Suddenly he wasn't sure about his question, but by the looks of the older dragon, there was no stepping back now.

"\_With all due respect... why you?"\_ Lohengrin asked \_"I mean, there are lots of Elders here as well, and-"\_

Elder Zorhen, firmly interrupted him.

"\_Because you are young, I am willing forgive your disrespect this time. But be aware, that I will not tolerate any of it in the future. Understood?"\_

"\_Yes."\_

"\_And you will address me as 'Master' or 'Ahltar' in the Old Tongue under any and all circumstances."\_

"\_Yes, Master."\_

"\_Good." \_he finally sounded less threatening now. \_"Tell me, Lohengrin, son of Siegfried, do you honestly imagine that the Elders of the clan are Elders solely because of their age?\_"

Lohengrin shook his head.

"\_N-no..."\_

The old dragon shot an expecting glare at him.

"\_No, Master."\_ he said quickly.

"\_I had hoped so, otherwise you would not be as smart as you look. Each Elder has one specific purpose, one certain field of expertise which they mastered. Elder Tamaana for example, travels the Way of Life: when anyone is suffering from any kind of health issues,

physical or mental, nobody knows more about it than her. Elder Ragnar is on the Way of Tradition. He is the expert of the clan's history, our ancient rules and culture. Other Elders have chosen other kinds of knowledge to pursue; they learn it, broaden it and share it with the upcoming generations, so it will be preserved for as long as the clan exists. Mine is the Way of Knowledge. I have chosen not to specialize myself in any specific field; I possess a large amount of information about almost everything. I will never say that I have learned everything, because such a thing is not possible. But I can safely say that you cannot ask a thing from me that I am unable to answer. This makes me the only possible candidate to be your trainer for the upcoming years, as a leader has to be in possession of a general knowledge about a wide variety of matters. Have I managed to answer your question?\_

"\_Yes, Master.\_" Lohengrin stuttered, and bowed his head to show respect. The Elder's speech raised dozens of other questions in him, but he didn't dare to ask just yet.

"\_Do not worry, you will have all the answers you seek over time.\_" Elder Zorhen said to him reassuringly, like he could read the young dragon's thoughts. \_"But for now, we have to go; there is still a long journey ahead of us.\_"

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Spotted a mistake or something you like? Or just have a question? Review!<em><br>\_\*\*

I  
I  
I  
V

## 6. Beginnings - Chapter 5

Chapter 5.

Lohengrin was completely spent. It was both the exhaustion of the body, which one may feel after days of hunting or flying without rest, and the sensation of the mind overwrought by the endless storm of newer and newer information it had to process.

Elder Zorhen's lectures began on their way north, towards their new home. Lohengrin quickly realized that Zorhen's teaching methods were brutally effective, and completely without respite. There were no momentary stops, rests or any other kinds of recreational time. Each and every day was an endurance round where Zorhen pushed him to his limits over and over again. However, the old dragon had an infallible sense to determine how far he can go, what would be the point if he was going to push the dragon well beyond his abilities until he collapsed out of pure exhaustion, and never went over it.

At the beginning, when he had the spare capacity to do so, Lohengrin was mesmerised about how much he doesn't know about even the most basic aspects of life. For example, Lohengrin was sure he was fairly

competent when it came to flying, since he was famous among his generation for showing more than average talent. How wrong he was.

"\_Your wing work is sloppy and inefficient. In the higher layers of the air, you will find constantly blowing winds. If you carefully tilt both sets of your tailfins with the appropriate measure, you can use that wind to generate the lift you need to stay airborne, putting off much of the stress from your wing muscles. Those fins are capable of a wide variety of movements, and allow you to exploit the currents of the air from virtually any direction. There is a certain angle, if you keep your wings in that, you will barely feel your own weight, and you will be able to soar much longer distances." \_

So Lohengrin had to spend hours upon hours, practicing how to fly properly. The Shalnar ridges were notorious for their high peaks and canyons, so he could practice long-term level flight, climbing, diving, circling, accelerating and decelerating in the most effective way. During the first few occasions, he concentrated on making the right movements so much, he didn't even have the chance to admire the stunning and yet unfamiliar view of the landscape around him. After many months, when things became a routine, he found these flying exercises actually relaxing.

But every time he landed at the end of the day, he had to evaluate his experiences to the Elder, who never missed the chance to comment about almost everything, constantly explaining and imprinting the knowledge into Lohengrin's brain. Zorhen had the courtesy to hunt for both of them at the beginning, so the young Night Fury just had to come back, eat and then he could collapse at his sleeping spot in Zorhen's cave. The Elder always woke him up before dawn, and the learning procedure started again.

"\_Even though Wordren did an acceptable job with your upbringing, you are still underdeveloped in terms of your muscles and raw strength." \_

Due to Zorhen's endless training, Lohengrin was always running a lot. He often dwelt in the swampy forest, which served as an obstacle course with all the fallen logs, rocks and muddy soil, giving Lohengrin the perfect training ground to get from one point to another as fast as he could. What was most surprising, was that Zorhen often accompanied him on the track, talking as they dashed through the swamp, just as effortlessly, as if they were standing still and having a conversation. Sometimes trying to focus on Zorhen's words Lohengrin would end up smashing into logs face-first or tripping and falling into the pools of mud. It was mind-boggling to him that an aged dragon like Zorhen could keep up with him, centuries after his prime, the elder seemed to do these runs as if he was on a casual stroll.

The stamina-building exercises were often alternated with theoretical education. Zorhen began with practical things, like how can someone spot the signs of an impending storm, how to avoid it, what can you do when it gets you. About how to rely on instincts when in danger, where can someone find food and water in case of shortage or in foreign areas. Tree bark proved to be much more nourishing than Lohengrin would have originally thought.

He had to familiarise himself with almost every plant and animal in

the vicinity. How certain herbs cure illnesses, which ones are good for subsiding pain, and which ones are poisonous. After an unpleasant experience with a tempting looking mushroom which caused him to vomit for almost two days straight, he made a mental note to avoid it for the rest of his life.

Zorhen's explanations were relatively easy to follow, until he gradually began to use the other language, the Old Tongue. This language was commonly used by the Night Furies aeons ago, but as the Common Speech began to spread between all the different kinds of dragons, it went into a decline, becoming largely forgotten. Nowadays, the Old Tongue was only used for ceremonial reasons, and was usually only known well by a few Night Furies. This didn't stop Zorhen in teaching it to Lohengrin as \_"...it has such a cultural value, it must be preserved."\_

But it was so hard to learn! Lohengrin constantly had a hard time with the alien grammatical structure, and the unusual vowel sounds.

"\_Lehn ad sarkainn valiohr.\_" Lohengrin tried one night, during one of his conversations with Zorhen in the Old Tongue.

"\_Oh, so you are saffron?"\_ Zorhen asked, mimicking surprise \_"Well, that explains a lot.\_"

"\_No, I wanted to say 'I am a dragon'. \_Lohengrin explained.

"\_Then it is: 'Lehn ad \_\_\*\*sh\*\*\_\_arkainn valiohr.' "\_ Zorhen corrected him. \_"There is a difference between the 's' and the 'sh' sounds, do not exchange them.\_"

"\_Gen, Zorhen Ahltar.\_"

"\_Much better.\_" Zorhen nodded.

\* \* \*

><p>Soon after Elder Zorhen began to teach Lohengrin about the finesse of hunting, he stopped feeding him. After a week or two of fishing, Lohengrin was crazy for meat. Fish is nice and healthy, but he longed for some variety. He was never really successful at proper hunting before, but now he had no choice.</p>

So he soared high, determined to not let anything spot him before he does. Upon finding suitable prey which tried stay out of sight in a smaller grove, he flew away to get some distance, and landed without gaining attention. Lohengrin silently crept through the grove, with eyes fixed on his target, with Zorhen's raspy voice echoing inside his head, his mind busy with analysing and evaluating the situation.

"\_... choose your prey wisely..."\_

"Young stag, alone, slightly limping to his right hind leg."

"\_...patience is the key for success..."\_

"I only move when the wind blows, allowing the rustle of leaves to

conceal the sounds of my movements."

"...plan your approach carefully..."

"I'm coming from the opposite direction of the wind, so it carries my scent away."

"...get as close as you possibly can..."

"Its distance is roughly twenty steps from me... might be able to cover it with a long jump, but I'll get a bit closer, just to be sure."

"...check your chances..."

"Young, weak, alone and possibly injured prey, within pouncing distance. Unaware of my presence."

"...strike unexpectedly..."

Lohengrin launched himself forward from the cover of the bushes, and threw his legs around the unfortunate stag. It didn't even have the time to let out a frightened howl.

"...and without hesitation."

His head sprung forward like snake's, sinking his teeth deep into the neck of his flailing prey. With a quick, forceful yank of his jaw, the stag was done for.

What a marvellous feeling it was, after all the nerve-testing stalking and adrenaline charging preparations, to finally score a victory. Lohengrin had the urge to smile, but he was unable to do so, his muzzle being full of deliciously warm meat.

He spent almost an hour eating his prey, clearing all the bones and breaking them to get out the marrow. After stuffing himself, he flew to a nearby pond to drink a little and wash the blood off before going back to Zorhen's cave.

It had been a long time since he had actually had the chance to look at his reflection, and he was a bit surprised by what he saw. He was now three-quarter of the size of an average Night Fury. Distinctive changes were noticeable throughout his whole form. His legs widened, covering the width of his paws. The hatchling-hood chubbiness of his body disappeared; his neck, chest area, shoulders, back and tail were bulging with muscles now. His wingspan became impressively close to the average fifty feet.

This made him chuckle; as he realised he didn't really resemble the wide-eyed youngling anymore, which Zorhen took under his wing many seasons ago.

\* \* \*

><p>"<em>I believe I have described the mating procedure sufficiently enough."</em>

"Uh... yeah. Absolutely." Lohengrin blushed, almost feeling the heat radiating from his cheeks. To ease his awkwardness, he looked

out from the cave, staring into the whirling blizzard outside. The wind violently stirred the snowflakes this night, and it was so cold out there, Lohengrin wingtips became icy while he was on his usual trip around the ridges. Of course, Zorhen never even considered halting his progression for such an insignificant thing like a raging snowstorm.

"\_I'd still like to ask a question, which is partially related to the subject, Ahltar."\_

"\_Speak.\_" Zorhen nodded.

"\_You've told me about how much we dragons must respect life, and refrain from taking it.\_" Lohengrin began \_"Then how does, for example, hunting fit into this?"\_

"\_I will explain.\_" Zorhen replied \_"There are foundations in nature, which we should not and in fact, cannot contravene. Our digestive system is not made to use solely vegetable nutrition; therefore we developed the necessary tools to become successful hunters. We are like that, because nature \_\*\*needs\*\*\_ to have hunters, in order to maintain balance. If our prey, whether they are deer, boars or anything else were allowed to populate unchecked, their numbers would become more numerous than what this land is able to feed, and it would ruin the flora. And our prime targets are mostly the smaller, weaker, possibly sick ones, which is beneficial for both sides: Easier hunt for us, more diverse and healthy bloodline for them. This means mostly the ones with above average skill and health will have offspring, and they are likely to inherit those traits from their parents. We kill their surplus, which keeps us alive, and it makes them stronger in the long run, while also preserves the natural habitat for the future as well.\_"

"\_However" he continued \_"The laws of the world only determine \_\*\*what\*\*\_ can we do, it does not order us \_\*\*how\*\*\_ we should do it. When we allow our intelligence and self-consciousness to keep our inborn aggression in check, we make room to develop ourselves in different ways. When we learn to suppress our feral instincts to a certain degree, it makes us much more than mere animals. Reduced will to kill, and increasing curiosity about the world around us, makes us sentient beings while not neglecting the purpose nature entrusted us with.\_"

"\_But... then why can't we live with the Skrills peacefully?" Lohengrin asked, thinking out loud \_"Are they less sentient than us?"\_

"\_No, although we are the most intelligent amongst all dragons, it doesn't mean that they are lesser than us. The disagreement is not particularly between our two clans; their whole kind hates ours for reasons, whose origins can be traced back to ages.\_"

"\_What are those reasons, Ahltar, if I may ask?"\_

Elder Zorhen let out a large huff of breath.

"\_This is quite a long story, so I would advise to ask any further questions you may have before delving into it.\_"

Lohengrin was surprised, as he did have one other thing that bugged

him. After all the time they've spent together, he still wasn't used to Zorhen's ability to guess his thoughts.

"\_You've always said that we, Night Furies are so few. Why is that, I mean our clan doesn't seem to be small with almost sixty members...\_"

"\_Our kind's rarity can be related to two things." \_Zorhen said\_ "One is a rather simple biological reason. Our females' fertility cycle is dependent on many different factors, like appropriate emotional and mental state, food abundance, weather and what not, so a successful copulation is not an easy thing to achieve. In other words, normally it can take years of trial, before an actual pregnancy happens, and even then, there is usually only one egg laid. There are exceptions in some rare cases, but most couples are happy if they can have two or three offspring during their lives. The low birth-rate is the partial explanation about our lower numbers compared to other kinds of dragons, despite our long lifespan. Clan Toemnir is one of the most numerous clans I have seen, others are usually much fewer than us.\_

Zorhen stopped for a second, eyes trailing off, like he was trying to search deep into his memories.

"\_The other cause is the same historical reason" \_he hesitantly began\_ "why certain other kinds of dragons hate us. Have you ever heard the legend of Wotahn?" \_he asked.

"\_Of course I have. I was under the impression that everyone tells that tale to the young ones..."\_ Lohengrin answered curiously.

"\_Then you heard the basic, fairy tale version of it, which is based on part of the truth. Now you are going to hear the whole story, \_\_not the one that gets worn further and further away from the truth every time it is told."\_

"\_Thousands upon thousands of seasons ago, way before even the dawn of humanity, this world was quite a different place. We dragons were different too. Our kin, for example, lived in small, family-based communities; they constantly wandered around from one place to another, showing little care or knowledge about the world. Our forefathers shared this place with a cousin-kind of dragons. They were quite similar to us in many attributes, despite being little more than feral reptiles.\_

\_At an undefinable point, a foreign, immaterial power rose up, pouring darkness and chaos into the minds of many of our cousins. These ancient reptiles became possessed, and began to massacre anything and anyone who was not from their ranks. They all shared one thing in common: they seemingly obeyed one evil will. The identity of this being remained elusive for us, however it was as clear as daylight that it wanted to claim this world all to itself; using our simple-minded cousins as pawns to achieve that.\_

\_Those were desperate times for any other living beings, dragons and others alike. Slowly but surely, huge areas were purged of life, leaving only dirt and ashes behind as the pawns of the Archnemesis expanded its realm. Thick, black clouds littered the sky, blocking away the light; and everyone who was able to, had to flee for their

lives.\_

\_In those dark times, a young Night Fury mother found an orphaned hatchling on her travels. She could not leave him to his fate, so she adopted him, and raised him as her own. She decided to give a bright name to him to contrast the sad world around them, so she called the hatchling Reemen, which means Hope in the Old Tongue. Little Reemen had to see all the horrors cast upon us by the Archnemesis, and after he had lost his adoptive mother years later in an attack performed by the pawns of evil, he vowed to put an end to this. He was barely fully grown, when he claimed leadership to a larger pack of Night Furies. Dragons of the time used to respect nothing but strength. Using his new authority, Reemen began his journey, to unify all Night Furies under his command. He used persuasion, threats, sometimes brute force, and one by one he had many packs of dragons submitted to him. He did not stop at our kin however; he was the first who began to communicate with the other kinds of dragons, who were even more primitive at that point, than us.\_

\_His aim was to amass the largest army ever seen on the face of the globe, and take the fight to the Enemy. He managed to persuade tens of thousands, that if they want to avoid the extermination, they had to join his cause. Some say his strength and charisma were granted to him by blessing from the Spirits, I cannot confirm that. But his zeal and determination was unmatched, and if the stories are true, his physical abilities were like that as well.\_

\_In a bloody war which lasted for decades, Reemen and his armies managed to encircle the Archnemesis and most of his remaining reptilian pawns at a huge plain. The battle there lasted for days, the legends say the number of dragons darkened the sky, and the dry ground became swampy from all the blood that had been spilled. But Reemen and his armies managed to break the slave army of the Archnemesis, and according to the legend, Reemen killed it in a climactic duel. Witnesses told that It was destroyed in a ground-shattering explosion, which created an unbelievably huge crater on the battlefield. I am inclined to believe this, as I have seen that crater.\_

"\_Really?"\_ Lohengrin asked in awe.

"\_I have, although most of it is underwater now. It is months of flight from here, on the shores of a distant peninsula in the far west and south. But let us get back to the story."\_He scratched his throat and continued.\_ "From that fateful day, Reemen was called Wotahn, 'Victor' in the Old Tongue. He was an unquestionable hero, who saved this whole world from certain demise. This is what the fairy tale covers up, in its hatchling-friendly way. According to it, Wotahn and the Night Furies lived happily ever after. This is not exactly the case.\_

\_After Wotahn's army dissolved, he was determined to keep the Furies together. He suspected that he only managed to destroy the physical form of the Archnemesis, and it will return one day. He wanted his kind to stand ready to face the darkness once more, so he took his followers to a huge mountain range in the north, and established a realm of Night Furies. They picked a big enough mountain, and literally carved it full of spacious and artistic tunnels and halls. Don't asked me how, the knowledge to shape the living stone the way they did, is now lost to us. That place was named 'Menedhaec', which

means Refuge. And that it was: a safe haven for any and all Night Furies, a place what everyone called home. Wotahn organised the dragons into a working, prospering society; of which, even to this day, our clan system is based upon. A great conclave of our kind elected Wotahn as the High King of all Night Furies. And Wotahn dedicated the rest of his life to lead our kind into growth and greatness. He spread the word of the Menedhec, to encourage more Furies to join them. He organised us, and taught us to cooperate for our common future, instead of everyone chasing their own selfish desires.\_

\_Wotahn lived for more than a thousand years and his descendants continued to have a long life. They did everything to preserve his legacy, and act in line of his wishes. And our kind really flourished: we became smarter, better individuals, food was never an issue, and our numbers began to rise. We even sent Furies to other kinds of dragon clans, to serve as teachers and advisories.\_

"\_Then... what happened?" \_Lohengrin asked.

Zorhen sighed sadly.

"\_Time has proven to us that we are not as high and mighty as we originally thought." \_he answered \_"Many centuries after Wotahn's time, the High Kings began to deviate from his course, which eventually led to our downfall. Our mutual respect for each other slowly turned into envy, and intrigues. Instead of seeking knowledge and development, we began to seek pleasures and power. The teachers became overlords, the advisories became slavers, and slowly but surely, the very heart of our kind became darker and darker. The last but one High King had two sons. The elder brother's name was Haarion, and the younger was Leywanth. The difference between the brothers' personality was night and day, but they were still very close to each other in their youth. However, when Haarion ascended to the throne, his eagerness to prove himself became lust for power over time, and his confidence slowly turned into arrogance. He started to demand complete submission from any and all dragons, and those who protested against his deformed will were brutally killed as an example. Some said, it was the corrupt influence of the Archnemesis which began to show in the behaviour of our leaders, I cannot comment on that. What is known for sure, is that after Haarion has ordered the execution of a larger group of rebels and their families, Leywanth decided to step in, but despite his good intentions, it only made things worse. Others, upon seeing that it is possible to go against the mad king's will, began to rebel, aiming to put Leywanth on the throne, even if he himself had no intentions to usurp it from his brother. And, in addition to the fracture of our own kind, the other dragons rebelled against the oppression as well, and the situation escalated into a bloody, three-way conflict."\_

"\_Spirits of the Ancestors..." \_Lohengrin whispered mournfully.

"\_We had ascended too high, and our own faults led us to destroy ourselves." \_Zorhen gave a bitter sigh. \_"Every side committed horrible sins against the other in the shadows of the night, and by the time the fighting was over, everyone lost everything. Haarion's side was destroyed almost completely; the remainder of his followers surrendered themselves to Leywanth, and spent the rest of their lives trying to seek atonement for their crimes. The other dragons

descended again into a bunch of violent groups, feuding against each other, lacking any kind of guidance but developing a lasting hatred towards the Night Furies. Some still hate us unquestionably, like the Skrills, but for our fortune, the majority exercised forgiveness towards us over time." \_

"\_And what happened to Leywanth?" \_ Lohengrin asked, being slightly afraid about the answer.

"\_He gathered together the battered survivors of our kind, and as he saw what remained, he ordered the dissolution of the Night Fury realm and the abandonment of Menedhaec. He divided the remainder of our kin into clans, and ordered them to scatter around the globe, for our own safety. He established the guidelines of how a clan should work, and he himself became the Leader of a clan, somewhere far away from the Refuge. We have lost much of the knowledge about the world around us during that conflict, and what was even worse, our numbers dwindled to a fraction of what it used to be. I am not exaggerating at all when I say, that the vast majority of the Night Furies died by the claws and fangs of other Night Furies. Only a few thousand of us lived to see another day, out of the tens of thousands that once thrived. The situation was so dire, that lots of us thought that we were going to die out completely. Thankfully, the careful and clever reformation of our society, done by Leywanth, managed to save us from that dark fate.\_

\_Before our ancestors parted ways from each other, Leywanth made each and every soon-to-be clan leader swear that they will do everything in their power to preserve the peace between the clans, and, that when the time comes, they will all submit themselves to the next High King, should the situation demand it. For the evil of the Archnemesis still has not disappeared, and the time may come, when someone will unite us to face the danger Wotahn warned us about so many years ago." \_

Zorhen ended his tale, but took a sharp breath, and looked strictly into Lohengrin's eyes.

"\_And this is the absolute reason why you, Lohengrin, have to do everything you are able, in order to protect the lives of those you have sworn to look after. \_\_We simply are not in the position anymore, to allow us the loss of a few dragons. We did not recover too well from the Kinstrife, there are still only a few thousands of us left, scattered around the whole world, and the world around us is huge, and unfriendly. If you were ever to encounter a situation, when one of your own refuses the better judgement, you must talk, reason, argue with it first. Or beat it until it submits, but never, ever attempt to take the life of a Night Fury. The only exception from this rule, is to spare one from the long suffering before the inevitable." \_

"\_And what should I do with the Skrills?" \_Lohengrin asked.

"\_All of the above." \_Zorhen replied \_"Talk, reason, argue. And if none of it works, find the solution which costs the least amount of lives. The events of the Kinstrife taught us a \_\_\*\*very\*\*\_\_ important thing: Learn from the mistakes of the past, to \_\_\*\*never\*\*\_\_ repeat them again." \_

\* \* \*

><p><strong>AN: Don't worry guys, next time we're up for some action again! :)\*&

\*\*Spotted a mistake or something you like? Or just have a question?  
Review!\_  
><em>\*\*

I

I

I

V

## 7. Beginnings - Chapter 6

Chapter 6.

"\_Now that you can speak acceptably well in the Old Tongue, it is time for you to take another step forward, and learn the runes as well."\_

Elder Zorhen's announcement took Lohengrin off-guard again. Right when he thought he was about to finish this with this particular subject...

"\_Runes?"\_ he asked, being unfamiliar with the concept.

"\_Our ancestors invented a way to register their observations in written form, because it is safer than always relying on remembrance. Keeping an eye on your vicinity is key, simply because learning itself is nothing more than observing your surroundings, analysing how things work and use that knowledge for your own good, and the good of others. So there is a set of angular marks which can be carved into flat surfaces, essentially turning complete words and phrases into a form which can be read and understood long after the passing of the dragon who actually wrote it down."\_

"\_Oh. Now I understand, Master." \_Lohengrin said. "\_It's pretty clever, I suppose."\_

"\_That it is." \_Zorhen nodded \_"And come, let me show you what will be your reward, once you have learned how to read."\_

Lohengrin followed the old dragon through a series of narrow tunnels, which began at Zorhen's cave. He tried asking his master about them a couple of times so far, but he's never got a straight answer. Soon, he discovered that the tunnel leads into a quite spacious hall.

This hall was deep inside the heart of the mountain, yet the interior was actually quite bright and visible. As Lohengrin continued to look around, he discovered that there were a series small openings in the cave walls, designed and carved out to let the sunlight in. And the gentle light was just enough to notice the myriad of runes carved on the walls themselves.

"\_Welcome to the Hall of Enlightenment."\_ the elder said.

"\_This place... looks amazing!"\_ Lohengrin stuttered.

"\_Do you happen to have any other impressions?"\_ Zorhen asked inquisitively, with a vague smile on his face.

Lohengrin instantly knew that the question is supposed to be a test of some sort, so he took a few seconds to think and to further observe before attempting an answer.

"\_Well..."\_ he began, narrowing his eyes as he examined the area \_"I think this cave is not entirely your work alone, Master. The lighting design seems to be similar to the ones used before the Kinstrife. There are entrances here, which are likely to lead into smaller chambers, and judging by the number of the entrances and the amounts of text on the wall, I would think that several generations of Elders worked here. This would also explain why the same runes look slightly different on other wall sections, as if they were scribed by different dragons."\_

"\_Good." \_Zorhen nodded approvingly \_"Your assumptions are correct. This cave was here when I arrived to Clan Toemnir more than five centuries ago, and it will remain here long after I depart from this world."\_

"\_So you were a strider once, Ahltar?" \_ Lohengrin asked in surprise.

"Strider" was a term used to describe Night Furies who left their birthplace, and ventured around until they wished to settle into another clan or returned home. Such a thing was not uncommon at all, young Furies tend to be adventurous, and it provides the clans with new members from the outside to keep their bloodline sufficiently diverse. And it was the only way to hear about other clans as well, for the Night Furies were scattered far away from each other.

What Lohengrin's problem was, is that he actually had a hard time trying to imagine Zorhen being young and adventurous. He immediately realised how silly it was, but still. After more than ten winters, he was so accustomed to Zorhen being very old and wise the thought of a youthful Zorhen not knowing the answer to every question in life seemed rather impossible.

"\_Yes, I was." \_he replied. \_"I have come from the far north, where the snow and ice never melts, and the daytime and night time can actually last for weeks."\_

"What a crazy place to live..." Lohengrin thought.

"\_Once you have learned to read the runes"\_ Zorhen continued, interrupting Lohengrin's pondering \_"You will spend a lot of time here, educating yourself further on your own. You are right, hundreds of my predecessors' writings can be found here, I have no doubt that you will find some of them very interesting."\_

\* \* \*

><p>Nothing could be heard but the sound of crickets in the moonless summer night. Only the light of the stars above gave some sort of vague impression of clarity.</p>

That did not comfort the two stalking Night Furies in the thick forest below; the sky wasn't even visible through the dense greenery above them. The lack of light fortunately didn't prove to be too distracting, as they could see almost perfectly in the dark, not to mention they didn't have to rely solely on their eyes to see anything. Their sharp sight combined with excellent hearing, smelling and echolocation made them very deadly predators.

Although, they were not exactly looking for prey this time.

"\_Lya, we've been sneaking around here for almost an hour..."  
\_Faelynn whispered.

Lyara gave an irritated sigh and stopped to look at her friend.

"\_Look, Lynn, I am absolutely sure I saw something on the way." \_she whispered back "\_I just want to make sure about it before we run to the guards."\_ she stood silently for a moment, raising her nose up and sniffing the air "\_I can almost feel their scent."\_

"\_That's just one more reason why we should stay out of this!" \_ Faelynn stressed, with a slight touch of fear in her voice.

Lyara just frowned, then tried to give her some reassurance.

"\_Give me one more hour. If I can't find them, we go home and forget this whole thing. If we do find something, we back off, and alert the Guards. Okay?"\_

"\_I have a bad feeling about this."\_ Faelynn sighed, but she gave a resigning nod towards her friend.

The duo continued to slowly creep through the forest, constantly sharpening their senses to catch any trace of sound or smell which should normally not belong here. Strict determination reflected on Lyara's face, as she sneaked carefully through the undergrowth. Faelynn silently followed her as best as she could, anxiety radiating from her every movement.

They went on and on, and even Lyara was about to call it off, when they suddenly heard faint whiffs of chattering.

"\_Did you hear that?"\_ Faelynn asked, her voice sounding a lot higher than usual.

"\_I did." \_Lyara stated, narrowing her eyes. "\_There's a clearing a few hundred steps from here, I think they are there."\_

"\_Fine, can we go now?"\_

"\_Not just yet." \_Lyara began crawling towards the clearing. But not straight towards the suspicious sounds, she slightly trailed off to the side so the gentle waft of the wind blowing around would not betray them by carrying their scents towards the intruders.

Since she was denied from the opportunity to protest again, Faelynn followed Lyara on her way. After spending a good ten minutes properly positioning themselves, they began to approach the clearing. Step by

step, they drew closer and closer, the traces of talk gradually becoming more noticeable. Then Lyara stopped so suddenly, Faelynn could barely avoid bumping into her, almost giving away their presence in quite an awkward way.

As she looked next to Lyara, she let out a barely audible whine.

There were three Skrills on the clearing. Although neither of the two dragonesses had seen one before, they instantly recognized them from the stories their parents used to tell. They looked even more frightening than in the stories, with their greyish-white scales, huge claws, broad jaws full of sharp fangs and reddishly glowing eyes. Their unique feature was even more underlined by the darkness of the night: as their entire body crackled with static electricity, yellow sparkles were visible on their hides. Even their size was worrisome: they were almost twice as big as the Night Furies. They seemed to be arguing over something, but they did it in their own language, so the two young females could not understand a thing. There was something next to them, which looked like the bloody remains of a boar. After a few moments, they seemed to reach an agreement, as they stopped arguing, and one of them began to eat, while the other two paced around impatiently, occasionally snarling at each other.

Lyara felt a light nudge at her shoulder.

"\_Do you think we've seen enough now?"\_ Faelynn whispered so quietly, Lyara had to read her lips. She gave an uneasy nod, then the two started to backtrack as silently as possible, to get enough distance from the hostile dragons to alert the nearest Guards.

As Lyara turned herself from the direction from the Skrills, she accidentally stepped on an air root with the same momentum. Since everything was quiet around, the blunt crack of the root seemed to sound just as sudden and loud as a thunder clap.

"\_Oh crap.\_"

Faelynn's concerned question has been suppressed by a deafening roar behind them.

"\_RUN!"\_ Lyara screamed, and they both bolted off into the darkness as fast as they could. Soon, she lost sight of Faelynn in the darkness, but she had no other choice but to keep on running, zigzagging around trees, jumping above bushes and crawling under tree logs. She desperately looked for a clear spot in the greenery to take off, but there was no easy way out of the forest. The obvious solution came so suddenly into her mind that she had the urge to curse herself for not thinking about it sooner.

"\_You idiot!" \_she cried out, then stopped, and sent a blazing fireball through the canopy above her. She launched up to try to fly out of the forest, but much to her horror, she felt a sharp pain in her tail, then an irresistible force pulled her back, slamming her into the undergrowth. She shook her head to get away the dizziness, and then she saw a dark figure looming over her.

"\_Y'thought you could get away that easy?" \_the Skrill barked, with an evil grin on his face, then moved his head right above Lyara's

"You ain't gonna run home and tell the others that we're 'ere!"

"\_Screw you!" \_Lyara snapped at him angrily, and slapped the Skrill right in the face, her claws raking the scales and drawing a bloody mark on him. The Skrill roared out in pain and involuntarily took a few steps back, giving Lyara just enough time to get up on all fours, and run towards the opposite direction of him.

Adrenaline rushed through her veins, and she gasped for air in her desperate run for her life. A shattering electric explosion tore apart a tree next to her, as the obviously angered Skrill shot a ray of lightning-like fire. She began to jump around randomly, to avoid giving the Skrill an opportunity for a clear shot.

For a minute or two, no further shots came, so Lyara risked a quick look behind her shoulders. The Skrill was nowhere to be seen, so she slowed down a bit and took a look around.

"\_Now, where the heck am I?"\_ she mumbled to herself in desperation, eyes searching around for any familiar object.

Somewhere from her right flank, another lightning-blast came and hit her. She screamed in agony as the explosion sent her through some bushes and she painfully landed on her back. Luckily, her fireproof scales saved her from a deadly wound, but the sheer force of the impact badly bruised her side. Aside from the fiery pain from her ribs, she felt her head spinning and couldn't hear anything but a loud ringing in her ears.

Lyara slowly rolled on her belly, and shakily tried to stand up again. Through the fog in her mind, her senses barely registered the three Skrills approaching. The closest one bit hard into her wing shoulder and hurled her to the other side, pinning her to the ground with his wing claws on her neck.

"\_Kill 'er!"\_ cried the Skrill with a bleeding gash on his forehead.

Lyara felt the iron grip tightening around her neck, but she only managed to let out a few terrified groans.

"\_You ain't so snappy now, huh?"\_ the Skrill growled "The rest of the worms will never know wha' appened to you..."

Lyara squirmed in her despair under him, but there was no escape. Her vision became blurry, and her lungs felt like they were on fire, as they demanded fresh air. As the world slowly became darker, she couldn't see anything besides the red eyes of the Skrill above her. The red eyes, filled with utter hatred.

The red eyes, promising a certain death.

Not a moment too soon, a huge purple-blue fireball exploded in the side of the Skrill, knocking him off with irresistible force. Lyara let out a pained yowl as she was shocked by a too near explosion for the second time in a couple of minutes. The blast whirled up a lot of dust from the ground, effectively rendering Lyara blind to anything farther than her nose. She coughed and tried to roll over and stand up again, only to feel someone who's a lot stronger than her,

grabbing her by the nape of her neck and forcefully pulling her away. Still feeling quite disoriented, Lyara couldn't put up much resistance, as the dragon moved her for a minute or two, before gently releasing her to the ground.

She opened her eyes to look at her saviour in her struggled to sit up.

"\_Don't worry.\_" the other Night Fury said in his deep voice  
\_"Faelynn managed to alert us, you're safe now.\_"

"A Guard!" Lyara thought. After a few moments, she managed to remember his name. Just as she opened her mouth to say something to him, a smaller figure appeared and crashed into her, throwing legs around her in a tight hug.

"\_Lyara!\_" Faelynn screamed, burying her face into Lyara's shoulder  
\_"I was worried sick that we wouldn't find you in time...\_"

"\_I... I'm okay now.\_" Lyara gasped, trying to ignore the dull pain she felt radiating from almost every part of her body.

A commanding shout came from above the trees.

"\_Salkonyr!\_"

The Guard answered the call immediately.

"\_We're here! I've got away with her, she's alive, Naveron!\_"

Loud rustling came from a nearby tree's canopy, as First Guard Naveron climbed down on the stout branches.

He took a quick look at the two young females in front of him, then addressed Salkonyr at once:

"\_You escort them back to the clan, while me and the rest will chase those bastards off our territory.\_"

"\_Aye, sir.\_" Salkonyr nodded.

Naveron quickly spread his wings and blasted his way through the interweaving canopies as he took off and began to fly towards the direction of the fight. Vicious snarls and explosions echoed through the forest as the Night Furies began to forcefully relegate the unwanted intruders.

"\_Let her go, so I can check her.\_" Salkonyr said softly, directing his words to Faelynn who was still desperately clinging into Lyara. She reluctantly let her friend go, while Salkonyr walked over them and thoroughly examined the ugly bruise at Lyara's side. He gently poked the wound with his nose, causing her to wince, then he gave a few licks to the bloody bite-mark to her wing shoulder to keep the gash clean.

"\_Nothing serious.\_" he assessed in a comforting tone, causing Faelynn to sigh in relief. \_"The bruise will heal quickly, and the bite will as well, once Elder Tamaana has properly cleaned and treated it. Trust me, the old lady's salves work wonders.\_"

"\_Thank you, Salko." \_Lyara sighed tiredly, and mustered up a weak smile.

"\_All right, girls!"\_ Salkonyr smiled back at them \_"Let's go home."\_

Salkonyr led the way for them, heading out from the forest so they can finally take off. Faelynn walked beside Lyara, trying to support her friend. Lyara seemed slightly annoyed by her overly concerned behaviour, but she didn't say a thing.

"\_What were you two doing out here, anyway?"\_ Salkonyr asked.

"\_Um... we..."\_ Faelynn faltered, looking at Lyara.

Lyara took a deep breath and began to explain:

"\_We wanted to practice hunting, and I thought I spotted one of the Skrills. I wasn't sure what I saw so I went to stalk up to them to make sure before rushing to you... And I screwed it up big-time."\_

"\_Not many dragons of your age could survive an encounter like this." \_Salkonyr pointed out.

"\_I'm not a hatchling anymore!"\_ Lyara cried out in resent. \_"I'm three winters from official adulthood!"\_

"\_Of course you aren't." \_Salkonyr told her quickly to sooth her \_"What I tried to say that your inexperience gave you an almost too costly lesson. Missing your role is usually not a good idea."\_

"\_Missing my role?" \_She asked confusedly.

"\_Look, you're aspiring to be a huntress, aren't you?"\_

"\_Well... yeah."\_

"\_Then you should leave investigating threats to us, and concentrate on what you're trained and good at."\_

"\_I just wanted to spare you guys from a false alarm!"\_ Lyara said defensively.

"\_Don't."\_ Salkonyr stated, and began to explain: \_"We'd rather go out two or three times more than necessary, but don't get yourself into trouble by doing a job which you aren't prepared for, because it can be lethal. You know, your father used to be my instructor when I was a rookie. He always said: 'Rather a river of sweat on training, than a drop of blood on the field.' And he was absolutely right; I would rather work twice or thrice as hard as normal, in order to avoid the injuries to others or worse."\_

"\_Speaking of your father" \_Faelynn butt in "\_I'm not sure how your parents will react when they see you..."\_

"\_Oh, I have an idea. Dad's going to royally freak out." \_Lyara said sadly, then an embarrassed smile appeared on her face \_"Mom will be a

lot easier: She'll just faint on the spot."—

\* \* \*

><p>Lohengrin was sitting alone for hours in the semi-darkness of the Hall of Enlightenment. Learning what each rune means was not as difficult as he had originally thought, by now, he was reading more or less fluently. Much to his admiration, the sheer amount of interesting reports, stories and interpretations was enormous; he couldn't even imagine how much effort this whole cave cost. And according to Zorhen, lots of the ancient knowledge the Night Furies once had was lost; the old ones must have been unbelievably clever, compared to today's average Fury. And even today's Furies were recognised as the smartest dragons of all.</p>

One part of the wall in front of him proved to be very interesting: it was a family tree of Clan Toemnir's leaders, dating back hundreds of generations. Elder Zorhen's writing was right on top of the list; the last entry was Siegfried, son of Siegurd. According to Zorhen's notes, the numbers of Clan Toemnir raised to a level when a clan-split happened, resulting in Lohengrin's grandfather and a good number of the clan moving away to someplace else. Lohengrin couldn't stop wondering if his grandfather would still be alive, he was his only relative now. Siegurd's mate passed away due to an illness a few years before the clan-split.

He greatly enjoyed tracing back his heritage, occasionally finding interesting facts about them, like Baraon, who lived for almost nine hundred years, or Caentongiir, who lead the fight against a group of rogue Changewing trespassers when he was only twenty winters old.

With a sudden idea, he decided to backtrack to the furthest point, to see who founded his clan. He walked beside the wall, getting nearer to the distant corner, going through hundreds of his forefathers' names until he found the last one, which was actually the very first:

"Leywanth, son of Daarion, younger brother of Haarion. Born forty-three years before the Kinstrife. Lineal descendant of Wotahn the Victor, Lord of Menedhaec, Master of Darkness, Dancer of Storms, Saviour of Dragonkind, true High King and supreme ruler of all Night Furies."

Lohengrin stood motionless, as if he had been struck by lightning. The weight of the discovery simply shocked him: he is a descendant of the most famous and most powerful Night Fury that ever existed. And his own name originated from the royal title of Wotahn. What is this supposed to mean? A strange coincidence? Or something else? Is Fate itself showing signs that it wants something with him?

In an effort to calm himself down from the shock of being the last descendant of the family which caused both the rise and the downfall of his whole kind, Lohengrin evoked Zorhen's words of an earlier lesson, which was about family and its importance:

"\_It does not matter where you come from, but \_\_\*\*what will you become\*\*\_\_\_. Evil or kindness is not something one can inherit, and in the end, everyone flies on a path of his own choosing. Your own decisions, your own actions determine who you are."\_

Forcing the scaring truth into the back of his mind, Lohengrin turned around to head out of the cavern and find his master. Zorhen made a few hints that his progress is heading towards a vital lesson, and he wanted to ask about it again. He had to be careful about expressing his opinion, Zorhen blatantly refused to teach him anything he felt Lohengrin is not yet ready for.

Elder Zorhen sat alone a few steps from the entrance of his cave, seemingly deep into his thoughts. As Lohengrin approached him, he spoke up.

"\_I have received troubling news from the clan.\_"

Lohengrin froze in mid-step. Another mind-bogglingly unaccountable trait of the old dragon was, that he seemed to be well informed about the rest of the Clan's doings. Sometimes, after a long pleading from his pupil, he reluctantly shared a few things, but he preferred to have Lohengrin solely occupied with his studies. This annoyed Lohengrin night and day, for he was longing for any kind of information about his friends and family, but he had to bear with the scraps Zorhen was willing to share.

Never before the old dragon made an announcement like that, so Lohengrin quickly sat down on his haunches and tried to suppress the cold sensation of worry and fear inside of him.

"\_The Skrills are apparently back to trespassing in our territory again.\_" Zorhen said.

Lohengrin felt his throat clench.

"\_Anyone hurt?\_" he asked.

"\_They were encountered by two young hunter aspirants. Luckily, only one of them suffered minor injuries, thanks to the nearest Guard patrol's timely arrival.\_"

"\_Who's the injured?\_"

Zorhen looked strictly into Lohengrin's blue eyes.

"\_Lyara, daughter of Melyan.\_"

Any traces of self-control suddenly vanished from Lohengrin, as he stood up, opened his wings, and would have took off immediately, had Zorhen not jumped right in front of him.

"\_Where do you think you are going?!\_" he asked angrily.

"\_Guess what? I'm going home!\_" Lohengrin bared his teeth, completely forgetting about himself \_"I am not going to sit here and doing nothing while my family and friend's in danger and-\_"

His rant was cut short by a forceful blow that hit with such speed and force, he couldn't react in time. Zorhen's clawless punch knocked him to his side. In a fraction of a second, Zorhen was right on top of him, holding him down with his forepaws.

Lohengrin roared in his rage, and he was about to claw at his mentor

when he felt a sharp pain at his temple, forcing him to go completely limp.

"Control your anger!" Zorhen growled.

"HOW CAN YOU-?!" Lohengrin managed to cry out, and tried to fidget out from the old dragon's firm grip, only earning another jab of pain.

"That I will teach you, amongst other things. But you must stay here and finish your training."

"But... they'll need me!"

"And? What will you do? Listen to your emotions and lead them into a trap? If you run home and take charge, you are only going to cause more deaths!"

Lohengrin took a sharp breath, and spent the rest of the minute controlling his breathing. As always, the old dragon's words were full of truth, and as soon as he was not blinded by the storm of vivid emotions inside, he saw the reason eventually.

Embarrassment occupied the place of his fading anger, he felt terrible for losing control to that magnitude, shaming Elder Zorhen's previous lessons and shaming himself.

Once Zorhen felt Lohengrin is calming down, he slowly stepped off from his chest, allowing him to sit up. The young dragon didn't dare to look into his eyes, he was staring at the ground, his voice riddled with shame as he spoke up.

"I... I apologise, Master, for my inappropriate behaviour."

"To put it mildly." Zorhen commented, causing Lohengrin to sink even lower.

Zorhen let the heavy silence thicken around them for a few moments, then he continued:

"The reappearance of the Skrills is not surprising, and it is certainly not an event the Elder Council is unprepared for. You have to trust them to keep the clan out of the bloodshed, as long as you are able to join them. Acting without thinking will only result in deaths, so we \*\*do not\*\* do that. Understood?"

"Yes, Master." Lohengrin said calmly.

Zorhen only looked at him for a couple of moments, then sighed loudly.

"I wished to spend a bit more time to prepare you for your upcoming lesson, but time is of the essence. You surely must have noticed the technique I used to paralyse you."

Lohengrin nodded.

"The technique you are going to learn, is called mind-taming. Our ancestors realised that the mind is far more than storage of information. It also houses a certain kind of energy. An experienced

mind tamer can use this energy to achieve things with its body, things which would be impossible otherwise. This is how I am still stronger and faster than you, for example."\_

"\_So it is a way to boost physical abilities, Master?"\_

"\_Not just physical."\_ Zorhen shook his head \_"The scale of one's mind's usefulness is determined by its mental potential. Everyone is able to tame their mind and use its energy, but at a different scale. Some more than others. There are three main levels of mind-taming: at the first one, you will learn how to be in absolute control of your senses. You can use your mind to locate and communicate with others without moving an inch. It can also multiply the sharpness of every other sense you have. The second level of mind-taming teaches you how to be in absolute control of your own body. How to force your wounds to heal a lot faster, how to make yourself many times faster and stronger for a limited period of time. How to completely shut off your sense of pain, rendering you unstoppable in battle."\_

"\_Unstoppable in battle?"\_

"\_For a limited time. One of the crucial rules of mind-taming, is that if you force your body to constantly make greater efforts than it would be able, you are going to exhaust yourself into a point of death."\_

"\_And what is the third level?" \_Lohengrin asked.

"\_The third level of mind-taming is only achievable to self-learning, so I cannot teach you that. Basically, it covers the limitless other possible uses of your mind energy. One sufficiently knowledgeable in mind-taming could use it for taking over someone else's body, invading one's mind to extract information, or even shred it to pieces. There are a huge variety of ethical and not so ethical uses."\_

"\_This knowledge"\_ Zorhen continued \_"of mind-taming was always restricted to a carefully selected group of dragons, for the risks of one's misusing its effects were severe. Traditionally, the clan leaders knew mind-taming to a certain extent, to give them the special advantage needed in tending for a whole community."\_

"\_I see." \_Lohengrin said quietly. \_"Did... did my father know this?"\_

"\_Yes, he did. You may have been spared of the details, but he fought with six Skrills at once, and took down five of them. Mind-taming can make you more dangerous, but certainly not invincible."\_ Zorhen explained.

Lohengrin sat silently in front of his Master. Suddenly, lots of things became clear, but only now did he realise what a tremendous weight will be on his shoulders, once he becomes the leader of his clan. Zorhen laid down a steady foundation of knowledge in his brain about a wide variety of matters, with mind taming he will be able to use it all at once, split his attention, multitask, and at least mentally be anywhere he's needed.

"\_Before we begin"\_ Zorhen interrupted his thoughts, speaking in a

rigorous manner \_"you must swear upon the Spirits and everything that is holy, that you will never attempt to use this sensitive knowledge to mistreat anyone. Contacting someone's mind, invading its most private space and reading its thoughts without permission is a severe crime and will be punished accordingly. Or for example, trying to use your mental powers to exercise violence is not a smaller crime. Do you know what will happen if you dare to misuse mind-taming for your own selfish needs?\_"

"\_You will hunt me down and tear my head off in front of the clan to show example?" \_Lohengrin asked back, with a hint of dry humour in his voice.

The long silence before Zorhen's answer convinced him that he is right.

"\_Precisely.\_"

\* \* \*

><p><strong>AN: Ohhoho, things are getting interesting now! The brief period of peace is over, and Lohen will have to find a solution very soon. Tune in for the next episode, when things will start to reach to the boiling point! ;)  
><strong>

\*\*And, as always:\*\*

\*\*Spotted a mistake or something you like? Or just have a question?  
Review!\_<br/>><em>\*\*

I

I

I

V

## 8. Beginnings - Chapter 7

Chapter 7.

The sun shone brightly and warmly above Toemnir valley, indicating the beginning of the summer. Lots of Furies found the pleasant weather calming as everything blossomed, filling the valley with bright colours and vivid life.

Except for the gang of Lyara, Faelynn, Altarem and Garenald. They were in a special position, too old to be considered younglings, but too young to be considered full members of the clan yet. To officially become an adult, they all needed to partake in the ancient rite of initiation, but their problem was that nobody was willing to tell them what that is about. Every time they tried to ask someone, they mostly received secretive smiles and evasive answers. All they knew was that their initiation is going to be in the next month.

The thought of everyone expecting them to do something to prove

themselves, but not letting them know what it actually is, frustrated them day and night, so they had to find an alternative solution to blow off some steam.

"\_Pinned ya!"\_ Lyara chimed, sitting on Garenald, holding him to the ground with her forelegs.

"\_This isn't fair."\_ Garen growled in annoyance \_"You've been practicing!"\_

"\_Oh well, Dad might have given me a few lessons..."\_ Lyara grinned mischievously, leaping off him.

A few steps behind them, Faelynn was sitting between the branches of the Great Aspen.

"\_I certainly wouldn't mind if someone-"\_

"\_Lynn, please!"\_ Altarem cut her off, looking up at her with an annoyed expression on his face \_"You've been saying that for two weeks now. They won't tell us anything. Period."\_

"\_Have you asked your brother?" \_Faelynn retorted.

"\_Yeah."\_ Altarem frowned again \_"He said it'll hurt a lot, but I think he's just pulling my tail again."\_

"\_Probably, yeah." \_Garenald said after standing up. \_"How about we catch your brother and beat him till he spits?"\_

"\_Garen. He's a Guard."\_ Altarem began to grin\_ "You can't even beat a huntress, let alone a trained Guard!"\_

"\_Screw you, Al!"\_

"\_Hey guys!" \_Lyara interrupted, staring at a point somewhere far above them \_"I think someone's heading this way."\_

Faelynn crawled up to a higher branch, sticking her head out of the canopy to see the incoming Night Fury.

"\_You're right."\_ she confirmed, narrowing her eyes at the incoming dragon. \_"Although I can't recognize him..."\_

"\_What makes you think he's a he?"\_ Garen asked.

"\_Oh I don't know, maybe because his wingspan is bigger than even yours?" \_

The unknown dragon did a snap roll in the air, and began to dive right towards them. Once he was at the height of the tree, he levelled up, did a half-circle and landed elegantly just a few steps away from them.

"\_What a fancy flight."\_ Lyara mumbled to herself.

"\_It's good to see you too, Lyara!"\_ the dragon smiled at her cheerfully.

He looked vastly different, his voice was much deeper, and his size

and build made the others look scrawny in comparison, but those blue eyes were unmistakable.

"\_Lohengrin?" \_ she asked with wide eyes, closing her jaw after realising that it had dropped.

"\_Up close and personal." \_he replied with a broad grin on his face, glad to see faces other than that of Zorhen's.

"\_It's been so long! I'm so... you're..." \_Lyara could barely find the words in her excitement, and instead dived over to her long-missed friend, resting her head over Lohengrin's neck.

"\_You look so... old!" \_Garenald cut in as he stepped closer too.

"\_Uhh... you too?" \_Lohengrin was unsure if he had just been complimented or insulted.

Altarem, Garenald and Lyara all sat down in front of Lohengrin. He couldn't help but feel a bit awkward around his former best friends, unsure how one can pick up what it left off after spending fifteen years separated from them.

Upon asking, Garenald spoke up first, explaining how he would like to be a Guard. Only Lohengrin showed any interest on the subject, as the others have heard him quite a few times. After a short while, Al interrupted him. He clearly looked like he's stressing upon something.

"\_Say," \_Altarem began,\_ "Being future clan leader and all; do you know anything about initiation? What's going to happen? How long does it take? The others won't tell us a thing!"\_

"\_Initiation? Well..." \_Lohengrin swallowed tensely\_, "Why no, nothing at all."\_

"\_Oh come on!" \_Garenald said impatiently, stepping closer towards Lohengrin \_"The others are making us crazy with constantly implying things and smirking in the background! So what is it exactly?"\_

The three dragons in front all began to walk towards him, making Lohengrin to flinch back at the direction of the Great Aspen.

"\_Guys... I don't know it either."\_ he said with an innocent face.

"\_Oh really?" \_ Lyara smirked, giving a mischievous glare at him .

Lohengrin gulped as his tail touched the bark of the tree.

"\_Yeah. I have nooo idea."\_ he tried again.

"\_Fine. Faelynn!"\_

"\_PILE UP!" \_ she screamed and launched herself from the tree.

Lohengrin sighed.

"\_Not-\_

Faelynn crashed right into him, smashing him to the ground, and in a fraction of a second, the other three dragons threw themselves on top of him too.

"\_...again.\_

"\_Welcome back, Lohen!" \_Garenald exclaimed from the top of the pile.

"\_It's sure good to see you guys.\_" Lohengrin moaned from the bottom of the pile.

"\_It's nice to see you too.\_" said Lyara, whose head was right next to Lohengrin's, and she gave a soft lick to him just under his eye.

Lohengrin chuckled and smiled goofily. Then, he stood up with all the dragons on his back, and began to spin, causing them to scream and laugh, and one by one they lost grip and fell off, and tumbled over the soft grass.

After losing the excessive weight, he let himself fall back to his haunches, joining to the others' laughter whilst grabbing his own head with both forepaws in an effort to halt the dizziness.

A few minutes later as the laughter died off, and Lyara spoke up:

"\_Let's get you to the central cave! The others will want to see you too!\_"

"\_Fine by me.\_" Lohengrin smiled \_"I'd like to see the others, as well.\_"

\* \* \*

><p>Although Lohengrin had imagined his return a couple of times during his training, he never actually expected much of a welcome. He was content with the thought that his friends and adoptive family will be happy to see him again just as much as he will be with them.</p>

Contrary to that, virtually the whole clan was around him, and everyone approached him to say a few nice words, from Elders to hatchlings who were born way after his departure. After the hunting parties came back, the commotion turned into a spontaneous celebration, with a feast, bonfires and revelry, lasting into the night.

By the end of the day, Lohengrin's facial muscles were aching from all the smiling, and his voice went hoarse after talking with everybody so much. He knew that this day would be memorable for him due to several various events, like how Wordy appeared, shouting, bumping into him and patting his back for minutes, how Elder Tamaana advertised her fish-diet by showing him as an example of a healthy lifestyle, how Melyan nuzzled him and said that he's a spitting image

of his father, how Elder Ragnar expressed his excitement to discuss the complexity of Clan-matters with him, how a bunch of hatchlings bounced around his legs while he received their parents' greetings, and so on.

He felt completely drained but he gave away no signs of it, and after a while, the crowd started to dissolve. Wordy, Melyan and Lyara remained last, and the two adults were preparing to leave as well, when Lyara came to him and asked:

"\_Are you going to live with us again?" \_

"\_Nope.\_ Lohengrin shook his head \_"I'm going to go back to the cave where my parents used to live. It might need some cleaning done, but it's mine, after all." \_

"\_Oh, okay.\_ her ears dropped \_"What are you doing tomorrow?" \_

"\_I'll have an audience with the Elder Council to deal with some formalities, but I'm free for the afternoon, so I might stop by and say hello. How about some casual hunting after it?" \_

"\_Sounds great.\_ Lyara smiled warmly again \_"See you tomorrow!" \_

She turned and left, along with her parents, who wished a good night to him.

Lohengrin sighed deeply as he looked around the central cave. Then, he proceeded out, and leapt into the air, enjoying the opportunity to stretch his wings. He did a wide circle above the valley which gradually quieted down around him, as those with night duty left and the rest went to sleep. With a sudden idea, he decided to use his mind to further scan the area, the way Elder Zorhen taught him. His sight slightly altered to pick up traces of presence along the valley, and the result reassured him further. Everyone was in their place and accounted for. After his survey, Lohengrin allowed himself some time to admire the view, and silently compliment his forefather's decision for choosing this place to reside; Toemnir valley looked beautiful in the illuminating moonshine.

He touched down at the entrance of his own cave with contradictory feelings swirling inside him. He felt a slight reluctance to enter; this was the cave where, from a certain point of view, his own life had begun and ended more than thirty winters ago.

As he went inside, he concluded that the cave felt just as homely and comfortable as he remembered it, aside from the thick layer of dust on the floor. Everything seemed to have been left untouched, the wide boulder his parents used to sleep on, the hexagonally-shaped fireplace, and the tiny brook at the back, which formed a two-step wide and one deep pool in one of the hollows of the floor before flowing out at a smaller tunnel. He tasted the water: it was cool and fresh, as it was supposed to be.

But he could not ignore the faint traces of his parents' scent all around, especially at the flat boulder. As if the cave itself would still hold the memories of those who once resided in it. This strange aura brought age-old memories back from the deepest reaches of

Lohengrin's mind, where they were buried away for a long time. Memories of comfort, love and safety, his father's caring voice as he told stories to him, his mother's gentle purring to help him fall asleep... Vague impressions and memory fragments, impossible to catch and observe properly, like when one's trying to remember a dream after waking up, or trying to hold a sip of water with his paws without letting any of it to flow away.

It was then that he noticed a dim shine coming from the water in the brook. He leaned over and dipped a paw into the water, pulling out a small blue gem. It took him a few moments, but his eyes widened and his heart fell as he remembered the day he had brought this to his mother, all those winters ago. He could still remember her words that day, just as vividly as ever:

"\_I am going to put it away in a safe place, and keep it forever. And it'll always remind me of you."\_

And after so many years, the lazulite was still there, still holding the gratitude and joy of Valerien inside its cerulean core. However, it turned out it would remind him more of her, than she could have ever expected.

Grasping the precious gem, he turned to the mouth of the cave. He looked up to see the velvety, dark blue sky, littered with shiny sparks of diamonds. Beautiful lights, each representing the soul of a loved one.

"\_You said you were proud of me"\_ Lohengrin whispered \_"and you've asked me to stay strong."\_

He gulped in an effort to swallow the lump in his throat. Then spoke up loudly and confidently.

"\_I will. So you can stay proud of me forever."\_

He settled himself down at the mouth of the cave. As he slowly dozed off, his paws gently cradled the gem, protecting it like his mother had once done to him with her wing, when she covered him from the dark and cold nights with her warmth and love.

\* \* \*

><p>Lohengrin spent the next few weeks settling back to his clan, catching up with his friends and familiarising himself with the higher-ranking Guards and Hunters. He often accompanied them to their respective trips, gathering first-paw experience about who does what and how.</p>

During one afternoon, when he was fishing together with Altarem, he noticed that something seemed to be bothering him.

"\_So, what do you want to do after our initiation?"\_ he asked curiously.

Altarem was so surprised that he managed to choke on the half-chewed piece of fish he had in his mouth. To prevent him from suffocating, Lohengrin quickly jumped to him and forcefully shoved him in the back a few times. After some violent hurls, Al managed to free his windpipe from the inapposite fish and coughed a few times.

"\_It wasn't that serious of a question..."\_ Lohengrin laughed.

"\_It's nothing,"\_ Altarem coughed, \_"Just caught something in the back of my throat..."\_

\_ "So?"\_

"\_Honestly... I-I don't know."\_ he blurted out after a few moments of thinking \_"Have you ever thought about going away for a bit and looking around somewhere else? I mean... this place is great and all, but... I have a feeling that I'm missing everything else from the world. I know that Lya and Lynn love to hunt, and Garen would like to be a Guard... But I have no ideas about myself. I just don't know."\_

"\_I haven't exactly thought about it, but I know what you mean. Have you tried to tell this to your family?"\_ Lohengrin asked.

"\_Yeah, to my brother."\_ Al said half-heartedly \_"He said I'm nuttier than squirrel poop sometimes."\_

"\_You know, there is a slight chance that your brother isn't always right."\_ Lohengrin said half-jokingly. \_"Elder Zorhen himself was just like you when he was our age, in-fact; it's a perfectly normal thing to feel."\_

"\_You think so?"\_

"\_No, I know so. There's nothing wrong with it if you'd like to spend a few years away from here and come back, or to find your fortune elsewhere. It's a completely natural thing, and it happens every once in a while. If you'd like to be a strider; I and I'm sure many of the other Furies, only wish you luck."\_

"\_I feared I'm not right in the head, Lohen..."\_ Altarem paused, as if unsure he should continue, \_"Thanks, I mean it."\_

"\_You're welcome."\_ Lohengrin said lightly, and turned towards the pond to catch another fish. Stepping on to a rock, he leaned forward towards the surface of the water, concentrating to the task at hand with narrowed eyes.

Altarem just watched him silently for a couple of seconds, then asked away:

"\_And what's going on between you and Lya?"\_

The question made Lohengrin's paw slip, and he almost fell face-first into the water. After a few wobbles, he balanced himself out and took a few steps back from the pond before attempting to answer.

"\_W-why do you think there's something going on?"\_ he asked back, his tone sounding a bit frightened.

"\_Oh, I dunno..."\_ Al grinned, and made a few mocking gestures to think \_"Probably because you're all jumpy when she's around, constantly trying to show off, and always have to keep at least half an eye on her?"\_

Lohengrin tried to get away with an embarrassed chuckle, but as he saw Al's face, he knew he has to try and say something in defence.

"\_I-I'm fine around her, I don't know what you're talking about."  
\_Lohengrin avoided eye contact of any kind.

"\_You know it pretty well Lohen."\_

Now it was Lohengrin's turn to feel awkward.

"\_I'm not sure.\_" he blurted out \_"I'm not sure where we stand with each other now. I mean, she was like a sister to me. Now I haven't seen her for fifteen years. Both of us have grown up, and changed a lot. I just... have to figure things out first.\_"

"\_Alright, Alright!"\_Al chuckled, waiting a moment before continuing  
\_"Can't say I blame you though, she is beautiful." \_He admitted.\_

"\_That she is..."\_ Lohengrin mumbled half-heartedly, with his gaze wandering away. Then he shook his head and looked at his grinning friend.

"\_And now that we've finished putting each other into embarrassing situations, can we do something else?"\_

"\_How about we go to the Great Aspen so you can carve in two 'L's and draw big heart around-\_

"\_HEY! "\_

\* \* \*

><p>It was an old tradition in the clan of Toemnir, to scare the youth a bit with the initiation. It was an act of great significance, no doubt about that, but all the secrecy around it was just the mature dragons' prank on the young ones.<p>

When the five dragons of this year's event were standing in the cave of the Elder Council, surrounded by everyone else, all of them with the exception of Lohengrin fumed in anger for being fooled.

"\_So much fuss about nothing."\_ Faelynn growled.

"\_Excuse me for a moment, can I go out and kill my brother?"\_ Altarem asked the crowd around them.

"\_Easy, guys, we're about to begin."\_ Lohengrin warned.

Seemingly to justify his words, Elder Ragnar stepped forward, and scratched his throat to gain attention.

"\_Brothers and Sisters of Clan Toemnir"\_ he began in a booming voice  
\_"We are here today to celebrate these five young dragon's maturation, and accept them into our ranks. This particular event however, will be slightly different from the usual. Lohengrin, son of Siegfried, please step forward.\_

Lohengrin did so, and took his place next to the elder, facing the crowd.

"\_By birthright, you are heir to the title of Leader and Protector of this clan. Are you willing to accept this position, and carry the burden of responsibility for the rest of your life, or until you step down?"\_ Ragnar asked ceremoniously.

"\_Yes, I am."\_

"\_Are you willing to do everything in your power to preserve the lives depending on you, and to ensure this Clan's survival?"\_

"\_Yes, I am."\_

"\_Are you ready to put this whole Clan's needs before everyone else's, including your own?"\_

"\_I am. My life, for my Clan."\_ Lohengrin answered, an unwavering expression colouring his features.

Upon hearing these words, Elder Ragnar placed a paw on his shoulder, and blew fire to the other paw. He kept it up with the continuous stream of fire, until his claws were glowing in a cerise shade, then touched Lohengrin's neck with them and began to carve.

"\_Then you shall bear the mark of the Leader, next to the mark of Clan Toemnir!"\_

The marking was supposed to be painful, so the reaction of the marked one can represent their willingness to do what they can, for the common good. Lohengrin didn't even flick an ear while Ragnar marked him, earning a few admiring glances from the crowd in front of him.

"\_It is done, then."\_ Ragnar announced while he took a step backwards from Lohengrin. "\_You have entered this cave as a youngling before adulthood. Now, you shall exit it as Leader and Protector of Clan Toemnir. Long live Leader Lohengrin! Llien Lohengrin Valdr!"\_

"\_LIIEN LOHENGRIN VALDR!"\_ the clan echoed thunderously.

Lohengrin allowed himself a thankful smile, and stepped forward to address his clan.

"\_Before I say anything, I have to properly express my sincere thanks for Elder Ragnar and the rest of the Council of Elders for the precious support and leadership they've provided in the past thirty winters."\_

He gave an acknowledging bow towards the Elders behind him, and much to his surprise, he saw Elder Zorhen amongst them, at the back. He wore a proud grin as he looked at him and motioned to go on.

"\_And now, let us go forward with the initiation."\_ he looked at his four friends who were shifting from one leg to another in anxiety.

"\_Is there anyone among you, who would wish to not bind its life with Clan Toemnir?"\_

After a few moments, Altarem stepped forward, earning quite a few curious murmurs from the crowd and scared glares from his friends.

"\_Altarem, son of Albarad."\_ Lohengrin spoke up, and everyone went silent again. "\_Everyone shall forge their own fortune. If you desire to explore lands other than our own, you are free to leave. However, I would like to ask you to keep in mind two things wherever your path shall take you: Always remember where you have come from. And always remember, that we are happy to welcome you back here.\_"

"\_I... thank you for your understanding, Lohengrin Valdr.\_" Altarem made a bow, and stepped back.

Lohengrin nodded, and then looked at the other three impatient youngsters.

"\_The rest of you, please come forward.\_"

Lyara, Faelynn and Garenald all walked up to Lohengrin and sat down in front of the crowd.

"\_Are you willing to swear upon the spirits of your ancestors that you will be a part of our clan, treat it's other members with respect and care while receiving the same, and do what is expected from you\_for the common good and better future of our clan? \_

"\_I am.\_" they said in unison.

One by one, Lohengrin marked them at the right side of their neck, using the same method as Ragnar did. It was just a small but elaborate mark, which would turn into a barely visible scar on their scales over time. But they all wore it proudly, as it symbolised the most defining and important aspect of their future life: their everlasting unity with their clan.

When Lohengrin finished with the rite, he stepped back and addressed them for one final time:

"\_From this moment, you three are one with the rest of us, until the Spirits call your souls to the Starpath. May Their goodwill accompany you on the ways of your fate.\_"

Soon the three dragons disappeared between the crowds of congratulating Night Furies. The initiation was finished; all that was left is the usual celebration with a feast. The congestion of the central cave slowly began to decrease as the dragons were starting to head out to the valley, where the hunters were already setting up bonfires and bringing the food.

As Lohengrin slowly walked out, he noticed the slight change in the attitude of the others towards him: almost everyone seemed to show little signs of respect, like stepping out from his way, making little bows and saying a few nice words to him as he passed.

When he was outside, Altarem approached him.

"\_Hey Al!\_" Lohengrin greeted him with a smile.

"\_Lohen, I... I'd like to leave at dawn.\_"

"\_Oh. So soon?"\_

"\_Y'know, I'm not really good with farewells... I just want to be off before I change my mind."\_

"\_Alright then, I'll leave you to your family."\_ Lohengrin glanced behind Altarem, to see the young dragon's parents and older brother who didn't seem too happy with Al's decision. \_"Remember this is your life, you only get one, so be sure you're the one living it. I'll see you at dawn."\_

Altarem nodded, and paced back to his family. But before Lohengrin could move two steps, Lyara and her family found him.

"\_You certainly know how to make a good show!"\_ Lyara exclaimed, and bumped her head into his shoulder.

"\_Well, it is my job from now on."\_ Lohengrin smiled at her. \_"Go ahead and eat, I have a few remaining things to sort out, and-"\_

"\_No way, kiddo, you're eating with us!"\_ Wordren stated.

The outburst earned the disturbed glances of Melyan, Lyara and Lohengrin.

"\_Oh. Umm... I mean... Would... you share your meal with us-"\_

Lyara and Lohengrin burst out laughing, while Melyan buried her face into her paws.

"\_Alright, alright I'm hopeless, okay?"\_ Wordren cried out, smiling awkwardly.

"\_I would never miss a chance to be with you."\_ Lohengrin smiled warmly \_"Just go ahead, and I'll follow shortly."\_

Melyan shook her head in disbelief, and nudged her mate away.

"\_You mind if I stay?"\_ Lyara asked and sat down next to Lohengrin.

"\_Of course not. I'd just like to speak with-"\_

Elder Zorhen stepped out from the cave, looking a bit anxious and occasionally letting out growls of irritation.

"\_Zorhen Ahltar."\_ Lohengrin nodded to him.

"\_I am not your Master anymore, son." \_Zorhen said, and took a nervous look around.

"\_I just wanted to thank you for dropping by..."\_

"\_Do not get used to it, son, the crowd still freaks me out. I am better on my own."\_

"\_Can I speak with you for a moment?"\_ a soft voice called behind Zorhen's back.

Lohengrin just watched in astonishment as Zorhen's expression turned from annoyed to being terrified. He closed his eyes and let out a heavy sigh in resignation.

"\_Of course you can."\_ he turned around, revealing Elder Tamaana behind him.

"\_Please, excuse us.\_" she said, nodding towards them before walking away with Zorhen.

Lohengrin and Lyara silently watched as the two Elders disappeared.

"\_What the... what?"\_ she asked.

"\_I don't have clue about what's going on.\_" Lohengrin shook his head  
\_"Feels like these two go way back together... I'd say lets go and eat instead of trying to figure out centuries-old relationships."\_

"\_That's actually not a bad idea.\_"

Lohengrin decided to not think about anything else and enjoy the evening with his adoptive family and friends around him. He will have plenty of time to deal with the dozens of matters regarding the clan's life later, and Wordy wouldn't let him think about any serious things anyway with his constant efforts to be funny. He literally bombarded him with question after question about Elder Zorhen and his training. And Lohengrin happily shared some of his funnier experiences with everyone around him; it felt good to be like any normal Night Fury, without the additional weight of responsibility on his shoulders.

The celebration lasted well after midnight. Lohengrin went to sleep with a feeling that this night was the most fun he'd had in a very, very long time.

The first rays of the morning sun just began to appear above the white capped mountains of Toemnir valley, finding Altarem standing under the Great Aspen, in the company of his friends for the last time. He had already bid farewell to his family, and now he was clawing the ground in awkwardness, being unsure what to say to those whom he grew up with, and might never see again.

"\_I have to say I admire your decision.\_" Lohengrin commented \_"I know I would not last long without any company in distant lands. But again, if this is what you want, I wish the best for you."\_

A grateful expression coloured Al's features.

"\_Thank you, Lohen. Like you said, I must be the one living my life.\_" he turned his head to see the rest of his friends \_"All of you. I'll never forget you, guys."\_

"\_You better not.\_" Lyara bumped heads with him.

"\_Yeah, take care of yourself, buddy.\_" Garen said.

"\_We won't forget you either.\_" Faelynn told to him, and gave a small

lick to his face, earning a sheepish grin from Altarem.

With one last smile, Al raised his wings and leapt into the air. The four dragons at the tree watched him becoming a black spot on the horizon, before vanishing completely into the blur.

\* \* \*

><p>The next few weeks were quite busy for Lohengrin. He'd spent a lot of time reforming lots of things, including hunting parties for example. He reduced the party numbers from the traditional seven to four, since according to his observations, a smaller group worked almost as efficiently as a larger. The changes resulted in more frequent hunts, but the party members had more time to spend with their families, which they valued greatly.</p>

Another burning issue was Guard duty. Third Guard Lohranne, who was in charge of the recruiting and training of new Guards, expressed her wish to step down and take some rest after three hundred years of active service. Lohengrin appointed Salkonyr to her place. He might have been younger than the usual higher-ranking Guards, but he was skilful, and more importantly, had personal experience with fighting the Skrills.

In an effort to counter the increasing number of Skrill-sightings, Lohengrin, together with First Guard Naveron, redrew the patrol lanes so the Guards can be closer to each other whenever the situation would demand it. Another possible solution would've been to increase the number of patrols, but they simply lacked the numbers to do it.

Finding a way to deal with the Skrills caused a great headache for Lohengrin. It seemed that there was no good solution to end this problem. Words only will not convince them to go away. A show of force would result in bloodshed, something Lohengrin really wanted to avoid.

He became restless. He often spent the nights up, trying to come up with something, but he just couldn't.

During their precious little time together, Lyara could sense her friend's tension. She did everything she could to keep Lohengrin's mind off the subject when they were together. Lohengrin greatly valued her efforts to keep him collected, especially because it worked. The only dragon, who could make him forget about the daily troubles and have fun, was Lyara.

But they met so rarely, since she worked hard to get into a hunting party, and once she was accepted she worked just as hard to progress forward. In only a few months, she became the prime of the newest hunting party, making her parents very proud.

After running through multiple scenarios inside his head, Lohengrin slowly but steadily began to formulate a plan. A plan which needed him to take a great risk or possibly a sacrifice, but he saw no other way which was even close to being acceptable. If his plan works, nobody has to die. If it doesn't, the price of one life measured against multiple ones makes the question pretty obvious.

He quickly paced through the tunnels of the central cave system in

his search for Naveron. He found him at the cave which he used for private meeting while he was on duty.

"\_Lohengrin Valdr!"\_ he said in surprise, backing away from the map carved into the cave wall \_"How can I be of service?"\_

"\_I think I know a way to get rid of the Skrills once and for all. I'm going to need your help."\_

"\_But of course, anything I can-\_"

"\_I need you to capture a Skrill for me."\_ Lohengrin said calmly, with strict determination on his face. \_"Alive."\_

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Countdown until the sh!testorm in 3...2...1...  
;D<strong>

\*\*As always, review, criticize, ask! And I'll answer.\*\*

\*\*Until next time o/\*\*

## 9. Beginnings - Chapter 8

Chapter 8.

"\_My Leader, with all due respect, I still have to say-\_"

"\_Naveron!"\_ Lohengrin interrupted, and gave him a strict look.  
\_"We've been through this a couple of times so far, and I will not change my mind!"\_

They were at a cave, about half an hour of flight from Toemnir valley. In front of the blocked entrance of the cave, two Guards were posting day and night to make sure the cave's temporary inhabitant stayed where he was. For further insurance, the cave's mouth was blocked by a huge boulder, completely sealing the prisoner off the rest of the world.

The cave's unwilling resident was a Skrill, captured by Naveron and a Wing of Guards while he tried to sneak through the clan's territory alone. He was dragged here and tossed into the cave; fortunately the seven Guards plus Naveron himself quickly overwhelmed him without taking any major injuries.

When Lohengrin revealed his plan to Naveron, he was completely shocked. Despite Lohengrin's efforts to explain his reasoning, he still regularly tried to talk him out of it. However, since he could not provide an alternative which would offer the same amount of success, Lohengrin kept to his plan, and ordered Naveron to keep the secret between only the two of them.

Understandably, the Skrill was not content with his situation, and expressed his disgust with very colourful language, yet his complaints fell on nobody's ears but his own. As per Lohengrin's direct orders, he was kept separated and without any food or water for ten days straight. By the end of the tenth day, the Skrill inside

was very quiet.

And now, Lohengrin was about to give him a visit.

"\_Open it.\_" he ordered the two Guards, and they slowly pushed the boulder partially out of the way, grunting and growling in the process.

"\_I'll go in and talk to him. You stay outside \_\_\*\*unless\*\*\_\_ I call for you, understood?" he asked, glaring at the three guards.

"\_Yes, my Leader.\_" Naveron said smoothly, albeit the expression on his face gave away his discomfort.

Lohengrin slowly walked inside, and the Guards pushed the boulder back, to narrow the entrance. In the semidarkness of the cave, it didn't take long for him to find the Skrill, who was curled into a ball in one of the dark corners.

As Lohengrin approached him, he lifted up his head a bit, to see him. Ten days of starvation eradicated his will to resist, it was openly visible.

"\_Have you come to kill me?" he groaned. Despite his voice being calm, Lohengrin spotted the fear in his eyes. He decided to play along.

"\_Maybe.\_" he growled "Although I think I may have a better use for you alive." He sat down, glaring coldly at the Skrill from above. "\_You do a small favour for me, and you can leave unharmed.\_"

"\_Not interested.\_" the Skrill said nonchalantly, and laid his head back to the ground.

In a fraction of a second, Lohengrin stood up, grabbed the Skrill's throat with his paw and shoved the dragon hard against the cave wall.

"\_Then, allow me to rephrase myself.\_" Lohengrin snarled, tightening his grip on the Skrill's neck "\_You will do what I say, or I'll tear you into pieces so slowly, you'll be begging for death!"\_

"\_O...okay! Okay!"\_ the Skrill choked.

Lohengrin gripped his neck even tighter, before letting him go. The Skrill fell to the ground in front of Lohengrin's feet, coughing and gasping for air.

"\_Wha... What do you need me to do?" he finally asked, avoiding eye contact with Lohengrin.

"\_I have a message for your clan's leader." He growled \_"You are going to deliver it.\_"

"\_He won't be interested in any message of yours..." \_the Skrill mumbled.

"\_Oh, he will.\_" Lohengrin said darkly. \_"He's going to love it.\_"

\* \* \*

><p>Lohengrin walked out of the cave, and the two Guards pushed the boulder back to close it immediately. He turned towards them.</p>

"\_Toss inside something to eat and then let the bastard out at dusk. Escort him to the outskirts of our territory; I don't want him flying around unchecked. He is free to go."\_

Lohengrin saw their puzzled looks, but they did not dare to argue so they simply nodded, acknowledging the order.

As Lohengrin began to walk away before flying back to the clan, Naveron accompanied him.

"\_So he agreed to carry your message?"\_

"\_I didn't give him much of a choice." \_Lohengrin answered.

Naveron let out a weary sigh.

"\_Is there any way I can get you to reconsider?"\_

Lohengrin gave a sharp look at him.

"\_There is not."\_ he said sternly \_"One way or another, this affair will end in five days."\_

"\_But the risk-\_"

"\_I appreciate your concern but there is no other way out which offers the same amount win-loss ratio!"\_ Lohengrin cut him off, almost shouting. \_"I am well aware of the risks; I thought it over again and again in the last weeks. It's either my solution, or going on an all-out war to drive them off. And I am not going to send anyone to their deaths unless there isn't a single other option left."\_

"\_Then send someone else to do it! Every Guard has sworn to protect the other members of the clan, and give their life for it if necessary! I volunteer to go instead of you!"\_

Lohengrin took a deep breath, to calm himself down.

"\_Naveron."\_ he began patiently \_"You seem to forget that I have also sworn to protect everyone, by whatever means necessary. I am not trying to take your responsibility; I am trying to fulfil mine. \_\_\*\*I am\*\*\_\_ going to do this. Period. I don't want to hear any more objections, am I clear?"\_

Naveron raised his head, and gave a final, resigned sigh.

"\_Yes, my Leader."\_

"\_I do not need your approval, Naveron." \_Lohengrin said calmly \_"The results will convince you. But I do need your cooperation."\_

"\_You can count on me, Lohengrin Valdr." \_came the answer. Lohengrin could still sense the First Guard's uneasiness, but he was willing to

help him.

And that's all he needed for now.

\* \* \*

><p>The hunting party returned, bringing the fresh food home for those who could not provide for themselves for some reason: Furies too old to hunt anymore or still too young to begin, expecting mothers, those who were on patrol... There were always a few who welcomed the chance of a free meal, and the hunters were assigned to help with this, and so were treated with high regard.</p>

And Lyara found the appreciation well worth any extra work. Seeing the grateful smiles of the old ones, or the cheering youngsters always warmed her heart. This was one of the main reasons why she chose to be a huntress, and never regretted it.

She was sitting a few steps back from the others, watching them eat when Lohengrin walked to her.

"\_I'd like to speak with you privately, if you have the time."\_-

"\_Of... course."\_ She said in surprise, narrowing her eyes upon seeing the determination his face.

She couldn't fail to notice the unusual tension in her friend's voice. And that scared her as well, as Lohengrin never seemed to be in doubt or uncertain when he dealt with clan matters. There must be a problem of some sort.

She followed him, as they walked away from company, until Lohengrin finally stopped in a small grove.

He turned around to face her.

"\_What's wrong, Lohen?"\_ She asked with concern, going ahead of him.

"\_I'd like to ask for your help. I have planned out a way to get rid of the Skrills once and for all, and I'd like you to accompany me along with Naveron, the day after tomorrow."\_-

Lyara could do nothing but blink for a few seconds.

"\_You... you know you can always count on me" \_she finally began  
\_"but I'm not exactly the best fighter around"\_-

"\_You don't have to fight at all." \_Lohengrin said quickly \_"I just need you to accompany me. Please, there's no one else I trust nearly enough to ask this."\_-

"\_Just... what is this plan of yours?"\_-

"\_I'd... prefer to explain everything when we are on our way.\_

Lyara gave a questioning glare at him as she tilted her head sideways a bit.

"\_So, you're basically asking me to follow you blindfolded, and offer my help to do something I'm not allowed to know yet.\_

Lohengrin felt his throat tightening, as he sank his claws into the soil in nervousness.

"\_Well... pretty much.\_" he admitted.

After a few moments of thought, Lyara finally spoke up.

"\_Alright, count me in.\_"

"\_Umm- Seriously?" Lohengrin's eyes widened in surprise. He'd expected the need of more convincing before she caved in...

"\_Hey.\_" Lyara said softly, taking a step closer to him. "\_It's not like I've ever let you down..."

"\_That's true.\_" Lohengrin smiled at her.

"\_And I have no intention of beginning it now.\_" she smiled back  
"\_Although I hope this plan of yours is a darn good one.\_"

"\_Trust me. If it works out, everyone will be very happy.\_"

"\_And if it doesn't?\_"

"\_That's not an option.\_" Lohengrin stated. Now that his plan is in the motion, there was no stepping back now. All of the responsibility was on his shoulders from this point, and he will go through this, by any means necessary.

"\_I have no intention of starting to let others down either.\_" he said, voice filled with solid determination.

\* \* \*

><p>Two days later, as the sun was about to touch the horizon, its rays found three Night Furies sitting impatiently in a clearing surrounded by the biggest forest on the territory of Clan Toemnir.</p>

"\_What are we waiting for, exactly?" Lyara asked with constrained calmness.

Lohengrin narrowed his eyes.

"\_He's here.\_"

Both Lyara and Naveron began to look around, but couldn't see a thing.

"\_Who is here-\_"

A low, grumbling voice filled with hatred answered her, which didn't belong to any Night Furies.

"\_I am.\_"

Three Skrills stepped out from the forest. Their pale scales turned

orange by the rays of the setting sun, and with their eyes beaming in an orange-red colour, they seemed more like fire-daemons. Lyara jumped back, baring teeth towards them.

"\_LOHEN, WHAT THE-\_

"\_Stand down Lyara.\_" Lohengrin growled in a peremptory tone. \_"This thing is between him and me.\_"

"\_The boss worm is right!" \_the biggest of the three Skrills barked. \_"He's got bored of his life, and offered me everything else with it, so I...\_"

"\_So you will shut your filthy mouth, because nobody cares about your laughable attempts to be threatening." \_Lohengrin interrupted, earning a furious glare from him\_ "The deal is the following: we solve our disagreement with a duel. If you win, my clan will move away from these lands and hand it over to you. If I win, your clan will go away, and never bother us again. You are the challenged one, you can state your rules, according to the Code of Honour. The two witnesses from both sides will oversee the fairness of the spar.\_"

The huge Skrill eyed him full of hatred for a few seconds.

"\_Alright.\_" he began \_"Hear my rules. No flight, no fire. Claws and fangs only.\_" his mouth curled into an evil grin \_"And the fight is to the death.\_"

Lohengrin swallowed tensely. He suspected that he can't avoid this.

"\_So be it.\_" he growled.

While Lohengrin was talking to the Skrill, Lyara stepped to Naveron.

"\_For the love of the Spirits, what the heck is going on?!" \_ she asked.

"\_This is exactly what it looks like.\_" He answered.

The short answer made Lyara even more horrified.

"\_Naveron, you can't be serious! This is madness, if he loses, we lose everything! What kind of idiotic plan is this? Don't tell me you approve-\_"

"\_I do not approve one single word of this plan.\_" Naveron cut her off \_"But I have no room to manoeuvre. I tried everything to convince him, I even offered that I'll take his place and fight instead of him. Nothing worked and if we publicly show any protest, it would discredit this whole endeavour. Our fate now lies within his paws; if he wins, we will finally have peace, after spending decades in the shadow of this threat. If he loses..."\_

"\_He DIES! And the rest of us have to abandon the place where our ancestors lived for thousands of generations!" \_she tried to cry out loud with keeping her voice unheard by the Skrills.

"\_Then we will start again, somewhere else. The Clan will live, and that's all that matters."\_

"\_How can you be so cruel and-"\_

"\_These were \_\_\*\*his\*\*\_\_ words, Lyara. Not mine."\_

\* \* \*

><p>Lohengrin and the Skrill leader were circling each other slowly, while the four witnesses receded aside, to the edge of the forest around the glade.</p>

Lohengrin had to resist the urge to smirk about how easily predictable the Skrill's behaviour was. He knew he couldn't resist his offer. And even with all the limitations he made, the fight was more than even. The advantage the Skrill had in a fight like this was his size and strength advantage. His longer claws, fangs and spikes all around his back and tail made him a seemingly much more dangerous opponent, than a common Night Fury.

But even if the Night Fury had the clear edge in the air, the Skrill forgot about a crucial thing: Night Furies have four legs, while the Skrills has only two. They walk and run on the ground by using the large claws on their wings. Although this method serves it's purpose, it also makes them ungraceful compared to a Night Fury, who can bounce in circles around them.

Lohengrin watched his opponent's movements with narrowed eyes, analysing his build, searching for any exploitable weaknesses in his armoured scales. This wouldn't be an easy battle, as a Skrill literally had spikes everywhere.

The Skrill chose this moment to begin his first attack: he let out a ferocious roar and charged at Lohengrin. He just stood there, waiting for the attack, as the Skrill made a long jump to close the distance between them...

Then Lohengrin jumped and twisted himself around, hitting the Skrill with his tail while he was in the air, sending him on a collision course with the ground. The Skrill rolled out his fall and got up in one smooth movement, getting into position again. Lohengrin dashed forward, but his blow was fended off by a wing, forcing him to alter his course and loop forward to evade the countering swipe. He landed hard, rolled to the side and got up.

The result was the exact mirror of their starting position, being a few metres away from eachother, exchanging menacing glares.

"\_You're not as weak as the other worms." \_the Skrill grinned at him  
\_"I'm gonna enjoy killing you."\_

"\_And how?" \_Lohengrin shot a sarcastic smile at him\_ "By making me laugh to the death? You couldn't even touch me, you overgrown inbred son of a newt!"\_

The Skrill's roar seemed to shatter the trees as he charged towards Lohengrin with surprising speed. Knowing that the time for warm-up, taunting and probing each other is over, he dashed forward to meet

his opponent's advance.

\* \* \*

><p>Lyara watched the brawl with jaws dropped in her horrified amazement, as both dragons attacked, blocked, evaded and attacked again in a bizarre frenzy of a dance, sometimes moving so fast around each other that she was barely able to follow. No unnecessary movements, no falter from either one.</p>

What made Lyara even more scared is that she saw her own awe mirrored by Naveron's expression. He was a trained, battle-hardened and experienced Guard, one of the best fighters the clan had to offer. He found comfort in intense fights, but here he was gasping at their leaders' battle.

"\_I can hardly believe what I see." \_Lyara whispered.

"\_Leaders are no ordinary dragons." \_Naveron commented \_"They possess knowledge way out of our reach. I saw Siegfried in fight; it took six Skrills to take him down. Lohengrin isn't a tad less dangerous."\_-

Lyara silently watched how Lohengrin spins away from a swipe, letting it miss him only by a few centimetres, then continuing his turn and kicking the Skrill in the side with a hind leg.

A shiver went down her spine as he realized that this Lohengrin is fundamentally different from the one she once cared for as a brother. Her brother hated fighting and couldn't stand the sight of blood. He was easy with laugh, and eager to explore the world, together with her. Now he was... so much more and less at the same time. Ever since he came back, he was calm, distant, weary with the weight of responsibility, which he wouldn't have had to bear for decades, had the circumstances been different. His youthful enthusiasm vanished, and a cold determination took its place. Seeing him lasting more than ten seconds in a fight like this would've been impossible before. During his years of training with Elder Zorhen, he went high above any regular Night Fury. And he used all of his might for the benefit of others, not hesitating for a moment to put his own life on the line, if he has the chance of saving more by doing so.

This duel crystal clearly proved how much he cared about the lives of his clan members.

"\_Can... he win?"\_ she mumbled hoarsely.

It was Naveron's turn now to stay silent.

"\_I can see what Lohengrin is trying to do..." \_he finally began\_ "He's trying to tire out the Skrill by dancing around him and occasionally making a few lighter hits and cuts. But the problem is, that the moment his concentration breaks, and makes one wrong step, he's in for a serious injury. He has to let the bastard close enough, but those spikes on him are extremely dangerous. They are a lot sharper than they look like."\_-

\_ "From here the fight seems pretty even..."\_ Lyara said hesitantly.

"\_True, until one of them makes a mistake."\_ Naveron mumbled darkly.  
"We have to trust Lohengrin. We have no other choice."  
\* \* \*

><p>As the fighting went on for what seemed like hours, and the Skrill showed no sign of weariness, a glimpse of fear appeared inside Lohengrin. He threw in every trick he knew; he even used his mind to fasten his reflexes. As he directed more and more energy towards the fighting, making it more and more ferocious with each passing minute, his other senses started to blur. It was like descending into a kind of mental state: every impression, effect and feeling he experienced was all about the fight, nothing else mattered.</p>

What caused some surprise to him is that the Skrill seemed to have similar mental powers, which made him able to keep up the ever so quickening pace. With a sudden idea, he reached out with his mind, to see if he can scan him and figure out what he's planning...

And he felt a powerful jab inside his skull, as if someone had shoved a claw into his brain. The bastard sensed his approach and went into a counter attack! He quickly retreated and bolstered up a mental barrier to shut out the pain...

When his leg slipped, and that was just enough. The Skrill dashed forward and launched a swipe coming from below. Lohengrin tried to jump back to avoid it, but he was too slow.

A twenty centimetre long wing-claw caught into the base of his neck, raking scales, tearing flesh and drawing blood as it went upwards. Luckily, Lohengrin raised his head when he jumped backwards, and that saved his life. Instead of his throat getting torn out, he got away with a long gash trailing from his chin, going along his neck. The wound wasn't deep, but it bled badly.

The Skrill gave no time to think, he swivelled to hit him with his spiky tail. Lohengrin ducked to avoid it, only to be kicked in the face by a hind leg. He was flung to the side, skidding on his back a couple of metres, then saw the Skrill making a jump right at him, moving in for the killing blow.

Lohengrin snarled and jerked upwards to kick the Skrill right in his lower belly, while sinking the claws of his forelegs into his chest. The Skrill flung off and tumbled into a few bushes behind.

Lohengrin rocketed to his feet, panting and hissing wildly as he tried to get himself together. His earlier focus was long gone; his mind was filled with pain from gashes and bruises all around his body. He growled as he spat out a mouthful of blood, along with a broken tooth. It will grow back...

If he lives to see the next day.

The Skrill dashed out with a lengthy jump, using his wing to beat off Lohengrin's defending paw, and sinking his teeth deep into the long outer bone of his wing.

"LOHENGRIN!" Lyara screamed desperately.

The bubble that kept the outside world out, burst, as Lohengrin

locked his visage with Lyara. In the brink of his defeat, he saw his friend's fright and despair as clearly as stars in the cloudless night.

The weight of her worrying look seemed unbearable. She's facing the death of her best friend. She's dreading the foresight of a ruined future. She's seeing a nightmare turning true...

The mere thought of this snapped something inside Lohengrin. He felt his blood boiling as a previously unknown, uncontrollable rampage stormed right through him, eradicating his self-control and igniting his soul with a hellish fire.

A tremendous roar of pain and rage rippled out from his throat, as he jumped forward around the Skrill with his wing still in his jaws. He was so fast, the Skrill couldn't even blink as Lohengrin went up, using a foreleg to slash the Skrill's leg, right at the knee joint. In the air, Lohengrin felt his trapped wing yanking him back, swinging him over to land on the Skrill's back. Taking full advantage of the situation, he used his own weight to push him to the ground. The Skrill's injured leg gave in and he collapsed, while Lohengrin pushed his head into the grass with one leg and curling the other one under the Skrill's neck, placing his claws right against it. A final, horrified growl of realisation escaped the Skrill's throat, blunted by the wing in his mouth.

With one forceful, sideways swipe, it was all over. Lohengrin felt his wing let go by the jaw of the Skrill, as the red-orange light from his eyes slowly dimmed away.

Still panting heavily, with his heart hammering inside his chest and pure adrenaline rushing through his veins, Lohengrin walked off from the remains of the Skrill leader, in the direction of the two other Skrills. As they saw the bloodied Night Fury approaching him with a flaming glare of wrath, they began to cower before him.

"\_You.\_" Lohengrin's voice boomed, baring teeth at them \_"Take away your dead. Part ways from him properly. And be gone from these lands forever in one day, or you will all share his fate!\_"

The Skrills were so terrified, they didn't dare to look at him, just mumbled something obediently and crawled out from his way crouching low, proceeding to get the broken remains of their late leader.

Lohengrin sat down, showing his back to the Skrills, even after they left. He tried to control his breathing to calm himself down and stop his trembling, but without much success. He stirred as he felt a gentle touch at his side. Forcing himself to tear his glare away from his blood soaked paw, he looked up to see Lyara and Naveron beside him.

"\_Lohen!" \_Lyara cried in a concerned tone \_"You're bleeding, we have to get you back to-\_"

"\_I'm fine." \_Lohengrin groaned. \_"I... just feel so... tired."\_

He saw Naveron jumping in front of him, saying something. His hearing went away as his eyelids grew heavy. He began to lean to the side, as his legs went weak and buckled, unable to support his own weight

anymore. He faintly sensed Lyara rushing to him, and bending to keep him up...

Then the world went blank, and empty.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>AN Cliffhanger!\*\*

\*\*Oh, I hate them too. ; ) \*\*

\*\*As always, Ask, Comment, Review!\_<br/>><em>\*\*

I

I

I

V

## 10. Beginnings - Chapter 9

Chapter 9.

"\_Ouch!" \_ Lohengrin hissed.

Elder Tamaana took a step back, and shot an annoyed glare at him.

"\_With all due respect, my Leader" \_she said, with a hint of sarcasm in her voice \_"a bit less whining like a hatchling would serve you just fine." \_

"\_But it stings!" \_Lohengrin protested.

He was lying on the floor of his own cave, he had regained consciousness only an hour ago. Since then, he made Elder Tamaana's efforts to properly tend to his wounds considerably harder.

In retaliation, the Elder expressed her opinion in quite a criticising tone, using attributives like wayward, reckless, rash, careless, and foolhardy.

"\_You are the mightiest warrior this clan has seen in near two centuries. Do not try to tell me that my cleaning salve hurts so much that it is unbearable!" \_

"\_Everyone has their weakness." \_Lohengrin sighed in resignation, and turned on his back, so the old healer could take a look at the gash on his neck. His left wing was already covered with the salve, around the area where the Skrill leader bit into it. The bite had caused the bone to crack, but fortunately it wasn't broken.

As she took a look at the ugly scar, Tamaana hissed and shook her head before looking at Lohengrin's eyes.

"\_By the Spirits!" \_ She cried out \_"Do you know how lucky you

are?!"\_

"\_I have a vague idea..."\_

She leaned closer to examine the wound before dipping her paw into the bowl full of her brown cleaning salve.

"\_Should that claw have gone any deeper, you would not be here talking to me."\_ She assessed, and went on to carefully coat the area with the ointment\_. "It is going to leave a scar."\_

"\_I know."\_ Lohengrin growled, tightening his jaw to suppress the urge to cry out again, as the healing salve stung the wound. To draw his attention away from the wound, he began to focus on the bowl, more exactly on Elder Zorhen's explanation about how to make one.

"\_...it is not much of an effort, really. You find a suitably sized and more or less rounded boulder, heat it up till it glows, then use the back of your paw covered in fireproof scales to shape it, applying pressure from the right direction..."\_

A few minutes later, Tamaana took a deep breath and stepped back, allowing Lohengrin to sit up.

"\_I think we are pretty much done... wait, what is with your lip?"\_ she asked, narrowing her eyes, looking at the scarred side of Lohengrin's jaw.

"\_I... may have taken a kick to the face, too."\_ he admitted hesitantly.

The reply made the old elder clearly dissatisfied.

"\_And of course you felt no need whatsoever to mention this." \_She said, giving Lohengrin a sharp look.

"\_Look, just get on with it, okay? I had my share of berating for today."\_ He growled tiredly.

"\_Open wide."\_

She leaned close to examine the mark left by the kick, and the inside of Lohengrin's mouth.

"\_Pull your fangs out."\_

A set of white teeth appeared from the gums. Elder Tamaana hummed, and raised a forepaw.

"\_Does it hurt if I do this?"\_ She asked and poked a spot inside.

The throaty growl gave the obvious answer.

Finishing the examination, the Elder took a step back, and motioned Lohengrin to close his jaw.

"\_Two teeth are missing from the upper right side. Luckily, there are no remains, they went out whole. Broken fragments could cause

infections and swelling, but since there aren't any, it will heal relatively quickly. Still, I would advise to chew on the other side for a few days. For this day, I am forbidding any visitor of yours to enter. You need to rest, especially your wing. The wound on your neck can open up again if you move your head too much. Stay inside for today and sleep." \_

"\_Fine."\_ Lohengrin said\_. "What do you mean you won't allow any visitors, two or three dragons certainly wouldn't overstress me- "\_

"\_Let me be the judge of that."\_ Tamaana cut in \_"And besides, we are not talking about two or three Furies, practically half of the clan are waiting outside. The rest aren't there because they are on duty." \_

"\_Wait... what!?" \_

"\_Everyone would like to see the hero who put his own life on the line to protect everyone else's." \_Tamaana smiled.

Lohengrin mustered up a constrained smile, but it wasn't very convincing. He was sure that once the Skrill threat has been dealt with, he will be calm and relieved. But, despite hearing legends about mighty warriors, who often faced impossible odds and still succeeded, and everyone viewed them as prime examples of bravery and devotion; he had to conclude that all stories gloss over the actual price of being a hero. This hasn't felt anything like victory. He killed a fellow dragon, because he had to. It brought him no joy or satisfaction.

And he has to stand ready to do it again, should the circumstances demand it. Whether he likes it or not.

\* \* \*

><p>The next day, after he managed to convince Tamaana that he did feel better than the day before, visitors began to appear inside of Lohengrin's cave. Sometimes alone, sometimes in groups of three or four, lots of Night Furies came by to congratulate or wish him a swift recovery.<p>

Naveron visited him too, and reported that he himself was out on the perimeter and saw the Skrills migrating, moving south in huge groups.

"\_I have to say, my Leader"\_ he began, shifting uncomfortably as he tried to swallow his pride \_"you were right from the beginning, and- "\_

"\_Naveron."\_ Lohengrin interrupted calmly \_"You don't have to apologize for doing your duty. I should be the one thanking you for your help." \_ a faint smile appeared on his face \_"I'm not willing to hold a grudge against you for doubting me. Things have worked out well, let's be happy about that." \_

In the late afternoon, when Lohengrin finally had some time alone, he saw a young hatchling trotting inside his cave with a fish lolling out from her mouth. She stopped and looked around, wide eyes obviously searching for him.

He took a step forward into the sunlight.

"Where did you leave your parents, little one?" he asked softly, a friendly smile appearing on his face.

Seeing a huge, scarred dragon appearing right beside her, the hatchling dropped the fish in her fright

"Umm... -"

"Selaryn!" A booming male voice came from the direction of the cave's entrance. "I told you \*\*not to \*\*\_ storm in!"

The male dragon rushed inside, his mate following him closely, taking a worried look at her hatchling. They both stopped at Lohengrin, and made an apologetic bow.

"Please excuse us-"

"It's fine." Lohengrin said quickly, a lenient smile colouring his expression.

The little girl ran towards her mother, and hid behind her legs, peeking out at Lohengrin from that safe place.

"Ahem..." the male cleared his throat, smiling embarrassedly "I don't think you know me-"

"You're Raylandt, son of Browliir, Night Guard from the Third Wing, along with your mate, Selara, daughter of Carasyl." Lohengrin said, much to the pleasant surprise of the two dragons in front of him. Seeing their reaction, he felt the need to add: "I may not know everyone personally in my clan, but I am familiar with everyone by sight at least. And please, no formalities when we're not in public."

"Woah, alright." Raylandt smiled "Thank you."

"Ray!" Selara whispered, and nudged her mate in the side.

"Oh, yes! Err... This little visit was actually our daughter's idea" Raylandt began to explain "When we told her what you had done, and that you were hurt, she asked us why don't we bring a fish for you to get better? I gave her one and we came here, but..." he glared at his daughter at this point "...she got a little impatient and couldn't wait for her parents to catch up."

Upon hearing this, Lohengrin lowered his head so his eyes can be in level with the hatchling's.

"This is so very kind of you." He said softly to her.

"Come on out, my dear." Selara took a step back to fully reveal the little dragon.

"Why don't we start this over, huh?" Lohengrin winked at her "Hello there, my name is Lohen. Nice to meet you."

The hatchling took a nervous look back to her mother, who smiled and

nodded encouragingly.

"\_H-hi Lohen. I'm Selaryn." \_She finally said after looking back at Lohengrin. Getting a bit braver in the role-play, she added: "\_How are you?"\_

"\_I'm much better now, thanks!" \_Lohengrin laughed \_"So you brought this fish for me?"\_ He asked, turning back to pick up the fish with his mouth and dropping it in front of the little girl.

"\_Y-yeah. Mommy always says I have to eat a lot to stay healthy and grow big..."\_

"\_She is right. Well, I still have to stay healthy and you have to grow big, so I'd like to share this fish with you."\_

"\_Really?" \_ Selaryn asked in surprise.

"\_Sure! You eat half of it, and I promise I'll eat the rest. Deal?"\_

"\_Deal!"\_ She exclaimed, licking her lips at the sight of the fish.

"\_Alright."\_ Lohengrin chuckled. \_"Your parents and I will leave you to eat while we have a few words with each other at the entrance of the cave, okay? "\_

"\_Okay!" \_Selaryn answered, before sinking her tiny teeth into the fish.

The three adults walked out and settled in front of the cave's mouth.

"\_Thank you for coming by; your daughter is really cute."\_ Lohengrin said to them in a warm tone.

Selara spoke up with an acknowledging smile on her face.

"\_We can't offer much more than our gratitude... But you've earned it, along with our respect. To be honest, a lot of us had expected you to order an assault on the Skrill's hideout for revenge, but you proved why \_\_\*\*you\*\*\_\_ are our Leader, and not someone else. I had the honour of knowing and fighting alongside your father. He was a good and honourable Leader. I fully believe that he would approve the way you get things done, and he would be very proud of you now.\_

Lohengrin opened his mouth to say something, but he couldn't really find the right words to express his feelings, so he closed it. He felt moved by the fact that so many dragons were concerned about him. Seeing everyone's and especially this family's reaction to his deeds made him more certain that he did the right thing after all.

A surprisingly demanding but still very young voice bailed him out of his wordless state.

"\_Lohen! You still have to eat your fish!"\_

Seeing Lohengrin's surprised glare, Raylandt turned to his

mate.

"\_She learned that from you!"\_ He exclaimed.

The three dragons all burst out laughing, as they rose up to go back inside again.

\* \* \*

><p>During the next days, Lohengrin slowly but surely sunk himself back to his day-to-day routine of Leader matters. As an unforseen side-effect of his duel with the Skrill leader, his popularity among the clan rose quite a lot. Before the events, most dragons respected him because of his heritage, which he felt undeserved. Now, he had earned his own fame, as dragons tend to greatly value shows of leadership, personal bravery and unselfishness.</p>

The most visible changes were among the females. Almost all single dragonesses began to show a much greater interest in him than before, which tickled his pride in one way, and caused some discomfort to him in an other.

However, one particular female was absent from his crowd of admirers.

The last time Lohengrin saw Lyara was the day of his duel, ever since then she wasn't looking for his company. This triggered an alarm in the back of Lohengrin's mind, an annoying and excruciating feeling of something being wrong.

Before the ominous duel he could always feel Lyara's support, and rely on it, whatever the problem was. Now that she wasn't here, her absence was like a never ending toothache: constantly there and tormenting, impossible to reach and examine properly. He had no idea what the problem was, but when he saw the panic on her face during the duel, it burned into his mind, and touched him deeper than anything else before. He missed her very much, even if he had other friends whom he could talk with, like Garenald or Faelynn.

During a night when he couldn't fall asleep right away, he laid down at his cave's entrance, staring the stars, thinking deeply, trying to understand how he felt towards her. This particular mixture of vivid emotions was so foreign to him. He knew death quite closely; he was able to handle that. But this seemed to be the polar opposite, and for the first time in years, he had no idea what to do. He always tried to have plans and backup plans for every scenario that may or may not happen regardless of the situation. But this was something he couldn't foresee, couldn't prepare for.

As his restlessness grew and grew, he sprung on his feet and leapt into the air.

He must to talk with her. Now.

\* \* \*

><p>Lyara looked at her trainees, all younglings between ten and twenty winters. They stood in a half circle around her, eagerly awaiting for tonight's hunting lesson to begin.</p>

"Now," she began "that we are all here, let's—"

The loud sound of flapping wings interrupted her, as she looked behind, she saw a huge Night Fury with beaming blue eyes landing. He quickly paced over her.

"I need to talk to you." Lohengrin said in a low voice.

"Can't you see that I'm a bit preoccupied?" Lyara hissed back, flashing an angry look at him.

Without hesitation, Lohengrin turned towards the younglings, who were all eyeing them curiously.

"Tonight's hunting lesson will be with Macharon. He's waiting for you in the clearing west of the riverbank."

Seeing that this was a dismissal, the young hunter aspirants took off and headed towards the place Lohengrin mentioned.

"I've arranged everything with Mach, and—"

"This was supposed to be my first day with them, and I've been preparing this for days!" Lyara snapped at him "You better have a darn good reason to—"

"I have." Lohengrin interrupted her calmly. "I want to know why are you avoiding me."

"To avoid roaring your head off." She growled, refusing to look him in the eyes.

Lohengrin hoped to distract her a bit with a straightforward question. It was obviously ineffective, much to his surprise.

"Are you... mad at me?" he asked.

Lyara took a sharp breath before growling again.

"Use your wit, Fancy Flight."

Lohengrin just blinked for a few seconds, then he gulped.

"I suppose so, but I have no idea—"

"OF COURSE you don't!" she roared "The Mighty Leader is above the concerns of mortal beings, he doesn't have to give a damn!"

"Lyara, what—"

"Do you have the slightest clue how I felt when you presented your genius idea of fighting the Skrill leader alone?!" she stepped up, roaring right into his face "Do you have any idea how scared I was when I saw what you're up against?! Of course not, the Mighty Leader doesn't need to explain his actions to anyone! You claimed to think about all the consequences! How do you think I'd have felt if you didn't succeed?! I almost watched you die in front of me, I almost LOST YOU, then you come up and ask: Are you mad at me? Well, I AM pretty darn mad at you, you fish-brained, idiotic,

reckless..."\_

Lohengrin stood still like a mountain in the windstorm, waiting patiently for Lyara to run out of breath. Eventually she did, after shouting about two dozen more names.

"\_Look, you're right."\_

The short reply caught Lyara off-guard.

"\_Wait, are you admitting that you're wrong?"\_ She asked, narrowing her eyes.

"\_Why is that so surprising?" \_Lohengrin asked back.

"\_Well, because it never happened before?"\_

"\_Times have changed. I will never claim to be perfect, and you are right. I should've told you the whole thing before going to the fight but I was afraid..."\_

"\_Afraid of what?"\_

"\_That you'd try to talk me out of it too. I would be lying if I said that I had no doubts or fears during it, but I don't have the luxury of showing uncertainty anymore. Everyone's counting on me to solve problems they cannot, but regardless of my training, I'm still a dragon like anyone else. I had two choices: an all-out war or a duel. I don't regret my choice and I would do it again, but I \_\_\*\*do\*\*\_\_ regret neglecting your opinion about it, and making you feel the way you did. Will you accept my apology?"\_

Lyara sighed deeply as she calmed herself down.

"\_Let's just... forget this whole thing."\_ she shook her head, then a faint smile appeared on her face. \_"I might have overreacted a bit."\_

Lohengrin couldn't resist the urge to smile, too.

"\_Maybe, but you still have a valid point."\_

She blinked a few times, then tilted her head to peek at Lohengrin's scar.

"\_Quite a scar you've got there..."\_

"\_Yeah, it's going to leave a mark. But I don't mind, at least it will remind me what I did, and why."\_

"\_And how do you feel about it?"\_

Now it was Lohengrin's turn to be surprised.

"\_Everything's written on my face, isn't it?"\_ he asked with a sad smile.

"\_That, and two minutes ago, you said you aren't as sure of yourself as you show."\_ she grinned\_ "So, out with it."\_

Lohengrin gulped as he felt a lump forming in his throat.

"\_Can we... go for a walk in the meantime?"\_

"\_Sure thing."\_

They began to walk towards the riverbank, while Lohengrin tried to collect his thoughts.

"\_Well..."\_ he began "\_I know that I did the right thing. A few days ago, when I had a bunch of visitors, two Night Guards came in with their daughter. Seeing them as a happy family made me even more sure, the price of a possible war would've been far too high.

But..."\_

"\_But?"\_

"\_I... I hadn't originally intended to kill him. I wanted him to yield, and submit to my will. And I shouldn't be so messed up by killing him; he was responsible for my parents' death. But... what if he had a family too? What if I just made a mortal enemy for myself? What if his son will want revenge on me, and then mine on him, what if I started an endless cycle of revenge after revenge and..."\_

"\_And what if there is no right choice sometimes? What if you did what you could, and that's all?" \_Lyara cut in. "\_I don't envy your position, this was a really tough call. But you can't deal with every 'what if' that would appear. Out of two bad choices, you chose the least bad one, and that's it. You have to learn how to let things go, and stop overcomplicating everything. You were ready to make the greatest sacrifice one possibly can for the sake of others. There's nothing else you can do, and you have to accept it. Sometimes, the simplest solutions are the least obvious."\_

Lohengrin stopped as he looked at her. Lyara wasn't exactly the first person he would've expected such wisdom from. As her words sunk in, he began to see the truth in them. It was so painfully obvious, he couldn't understand how it could've eluded him.

"\_You're so... right."\_ he muttered, gratitude filling his voice.

"\_Here we go again!"\_ Lyara laughed "\_This is your main problem, you don't know how to chill out. You need to stop overcomplicating everything and enjoy life a little bit more."\_

"\_Alright then, teach me."\_ Lohengrin challenged her. He had to smile too, as he noticed her magical eradication is taking an effect on him again. Now that he'd thought about it, there wasn't a single dragon, who could make him feel so much better in such a short time, as her.

A nose pressed against his. He swallowed as he felt the alluring whiff of her scent caressing his nostrils.

"\_You're it."\_ She whispered.

"\_W-what?"\_

"\_You're it!" \_She screamed, and bounced away from him, laughing.

Then she stopped, lowered herself in a playful stalking position, tail swinging side to side.

"\_Are we playing tag?"\_ Lohengrin asked in disbelief \_"For the Spirits, Lyara we aren't hatchlings anymore!"\_

"\_Come on Grandpa, stop being so serious! This is exactly what I talked about!"\_

"\_Lyara.\_"

"\_Oh, I know, you're just afraid you can't catch me!"\_

"\_Not again...\_"

"\_Poor Lohen's afraid of being humiliated!\_"

"\_Okay THAT'S IT! Run for your life!"\_

With a playful growl, he pounced after Lyara, who dodged him and bounced away. Being smaller, she was more nimble than Lohengrin could ever be, giving a hard time catching her. Zigzagging between trees, jumping and rolling while just barely missing each other, the chase went on with lots of laughter. It further cleared his head, and that beautiful slender tail escaping his grip made him finally realise something important. Instantly, he gave the chase everything he had, a toothy grin appearing on his face. Reaching a clearing, Lohengrin tried to tackle Lyara, and the only way she could avoid that, is to leap into the air.

"\_Now, you made a mistake!"\_ Lohengrin growled playfully. He gave her a few moments of vantage, and then rocketed up after her.

Lyara swiftly climbed higher and higher, before turning her head back to see where her pursuer is. To her surprise, Lohengrin was nowhere to be seen. She began to hover, turning left and right.

"\_Where the heck-\_"

In that moment, something huge and black crashed into her, legs gripping her mercilessly around her neck and waist.

"\_Gotcha!"\_ Lohengrin exclaimed, and he folded his wings as they began to fall towards the ground. Lyara just laughed in his embrace, but then as she looked forward, she saw the trees growing bigger rapidly.

"\_Lohen...\_"

"\_What?\_"

"\_Shouldn't you pull up?"\_ she asked, hints of fear in her voice.

"\_I don't know, why?"\_ he asked back in a chatting tone.

The ground was getting closer and closer. As Lyara looked at him, he pretended to be asleep, making loud snoring sounds.

"\_LOHENGRI!"\_

She was sure for a moment that they are going to crash into the woods. But, Lohengrin just laughed, and in the very last second, he stretched his wings wide and did a powerful spin, missing the greenery by just a few inches. With a few flaps, he slowed down, turned around and landed gently on his back, skidding for a few moments on the soft grass before stopping.

They just lay there shaking in their laughter.

"\_That was pretty awesome."\_ Lyara said after a while, resting her head on Lohengrin's chest.

"\_Your face was priceless."\_ Lohengrin commented, earning a pat to the nose.

She grabbed his neck, pulling herself up a bit.

"\_Can I ask you to stop scaring me out of my scales every time?\_" she asked half-jokingly.

"\_Anything for you."\_ Lohengrin answered softly.

"\_Is that so?"\_ She leaned closer, her paws resting beside his neck, her nose touching his.

"\_I don't want to be at a cross with you ever again. You're a lot more to me than a best friend. Without you, I don't feel whole. You've been there for me since we were hatchlings, and I've grown reliant on you. I need you far more than anyone or anything else in this world.\_"

She purred happily, and licked his face.

"\_You're such a word-juggler, you know that? What have I told you about keeping things simple?\_" she purred into his ear.

He grinned, grabbed her again and rolled around, so Lyara was under him and he was above, putting his weight to his knees on the ground. He stared deeply into her emerald eyes. Then said the word in the language he knew to be the most describing.

"\_Seretlec.\_"

Lyara curled her paws around his neck, and pulled him even closer.

"\_You do know, that no sane dragoness would ever say no to you, right?"\_ she asked.

"\_You do know that no dragoness has any chance against you, right?"  
\_Lohengrin asked back.

A happy purr vibrated from Lyara's throat, and she licked Lohengrin's neck before giving him the answer. "I love you too."

Her gaze was so inviting, Lohengrin gave in to the desire to succumb into her hug. The world around them gradually ceased to exist; there were only the two of them.

And the stars, high above.

\* \* \*

><p>Bright sunlight beamed through his eyelids, sending the cloud of dreams away. Lohengrin opened his eyes, to be greeted by a beautifully sunny morning, and Lyara's cute, sleepy expression as she lay on top of him, head resting on his chest. His paws were cradling her as he lay on his back, and even his wings were around her, forming the closest hug possible.</p>

Lohengrin slowly unfolded his wings, and stretched them wide on the ground. He had the urge to smile. Never before he had felt so peaceful, so satisfied. The whole world itself seemed to be a nicer place after yesterday's events.

His daydream was interrupted by Lyara's stirring, as she slowly opened her eyes, and let out a sleepy yawn.

"\_Good morning."\_ Lohengrin smiled at her.

She mumbled something in response, and curled her legs around his neck, pulling herself up a bit, her forehead touching his chin.

"\_Mornin'.\_" She managed a while later.

Lohengrin began to wash her ears with long, loving licks, earning a loud purr. Lyara's paws flexed, and she began to lick Lohengrin's neck, carefully going upwards. When she reached a sensitive spot at the left side of his chin, Lohengrin chuckled, and rolled them over again.

"\_You know, maybe we should go back.\_" Lyara said \_"We've been out here for a while; the others might be looking for us.\_"

"\_I don't give a damn.\_" Lohengrin answered simply, continuing to lick her face. \_"I'm learning how to... enjoy life now. The duties can wait.\_"

"\_You're... a fast learner!\_" Lyara chuckled, as the cleaning began to turn into a fight of who can lick the other one more.

"\_That I am, my love... That I am.\_"

\* \* \*

><p>It was late afternoon, when Lohengrin and Lyara arrived back to Toemnir valley. They flew right towards Wordren's cave. On their way in, they heard traces of a hassle.</p>

"\_She's not a hatchling anymore, Wordren.\_" Melyan explained \_"You can't keep an eye on her forever.\_"

"\_But she's still my daughter! Am I asking too much for wanting be at least notified if she decides to disappear for days?"\_

"\_Hi..." Lyara stepped in, taking a concerned look at her father.

"\_Lya!" \_ Wordren rushed to her \_"Where were you... what's going on here?"\_ he asked after spotting Lohengrin behind Lyara.

"\_I think I have an idea..." \_Melyan said, walking towards them and sitting down next to Wordren \_"Although I'd prefer to hear the story from them."\_

"\_What?"\_ Wordy asked in his confusion.

Lyara glanced back at Lohengrin, who confidently stepped forward to face Wordy.

"\_Wordren, your daughter has agreed to be my mate, and bind her life to mine. I would like to ask for your and your mate's blessing for us."\_

Wordren dropped his jaws wide, as he stood wordlessly. Lohengrin took a deep breath, as he tried not to show how nervous he is.

When the time came for Night Furies to choose a mate, the final decision was always made by the dragoness. Females had every right to accept or deny anyone's advances. Even after the two agreed upon a relationship, the male dragon still had to seek out the female's parents to ask for their permission. If the parents disliked the suitor, there were two solutions: the suitor could either accept the decision and try again later after he'd proved himself, or to fight for his right. The fight lasts only till the first blood, then the loser has to accept the winner's opinion. If a suitor loses a fight however, he is forbidden from the dragoness forever.

This was an age-old tradition of Clan Toemnir, but it only rarely resulted in an actual fight. Usually the parents were happy with their daughter's choice.

Lohengrin knew all this, but he also knew how protective Wordren can be when it's about his daughter, so readied himself for any possible outcome.

Seeing her mate's complete shock, Melyan spoke up first.

"\_I'm so happy for you two.\_ she smiled \_"I hope you'll gift us with many grandchildren!"\_

Lyara smiled sheepishly in her blush. Lohengrin gave a faint smile too, but his eyes remained fixed on Wordren.

"\_Wordy?"\_

The older dragon finally closed his jaws.

"\_I..."\_

Seeing not two, but three questioning glares, he burst out.

"\_Stop pressuring me, I need to think!"\_

"\_Dad!" \_Lyara protested. Lohengrin placed a paw on hers to gain her attention.

"\_I'll talk to him, don't worry."\_ he whispered to her. \_"Should we

go out and talk this over?" He asked Wordren.

"Fine." Wordren sighed, and followed the younger dragon outside, leaving the two dragonesses behind. At the mouth of his cave, Lohengrin faced him. He tried to swallow the lump in his throat and took a deep breath.

"Look, Wordy..." he began, trying to find the right words "I... I know that I'm asking a lot, but... she and I were always close to each other. It took me a lot of time, but I finally realized... She means the whole world to me, Wordy. She already gave me so much, and I want to see her happy forever. Will you give us your blessing?"

Wordren clawed the rock in his discomfort.

"This... this is just so sudden." he finally blurted out "She's my only daughter, and now she wants to go away to live with someone else... I wouldn't mind if you'd wait a few more winters!"

"Wordy. There isn't a force in this world that could cease Lyara's love for you. Not in even a hundred winters. But I love her, and she loves me. And I promise, I will take good care of her. It's all I want."

Wordren buried his face into his paws. Lohengrin stood silently in front of him, the nervous flicking of the tip of his tail showing his tension. After a few long moments, which seemed more like an hour, the older dragon finally spoke up:

"Every father wants the best for his daughter." he mumbled through his paws, then put them on the ground. "But she isn't going to find anyone who's better than you, so... Fine. You have my blessings."

"Love you daddy!" Lyara rushed out from the cave, jumping at her father, throwing her forelegs around his neck.

"Alright, alright." he laughed, nuzzling his daughter "But you two visit us regularly for at least a dinner, understood?"

"Yes sir." Lohengrin chuckled, as he let out a huff of sound relief.

\* \* \*

><p>The fact that Lohengrin and Lyara were mates, caused quite a gossip in the clan, but Lohengrin absolutely didn't mind. They were at least talking about something that made him really happy, so he was fine with it. His daily routine of constantly being everywhere, accompanying hunters, guards, and meddling into everything wasn't exactly kind for personal relationships, and he was afraid at first how would his mate would react to it. But Lyara seemed to take it well, as she had her own business to attend to with hunting and teaching younglings. They thoroughly enjoyed each other's company, and treasured every moment they could spend together.</p>

Many weeks later, Lohengrin woke up early one day. To his surprise, Lyara was awake too. She had arrived home late at night after hunting, it was uncommon for her to wake up before sunrise.

He stretched his wing to cover his mate, who purred and licked his face.

"\_Something wrong?"\_ Lohengrin asked, letting out a big great yawn.

"\_I don't know. I feel funny."\_ she muttered. \_"Maybe something I ate, I dunno. I think I'll visit Elder Tamaana today."\_

"\_You know, I can examine you the same way she can..."\_

"\_You've been examining me all the time!"\_ Lyara laughed \_"No, you have to go anyway, I'll just visit the good old Elder to find out what's up."\_

"\_Fine, have it your way." \_Lohengrin said. \_"I'll try to make things quick today, and get back in the afternoon."\_

"\_Sounds good."\_ she replied, and nuzzled her mate a goodbye as he got up. \_"I'll be here, I'm off duty today."\_

She just lay on their flat boulder for a while, then leisurely got up, drank a bit, ate the remaining scraps from yesterday's catch, and headed off to Elder Tamaana's den.

Her den was located in the central caverns, so it was only a short flight and a bit of a walk. During her trip, Lyara was a bit concerned that she may not find the elder in the cave. But Tamaana was there, sorting her immense array of bowls, full of all kinds of herbs.

"\_Good morning my dear, what brings you here?"\_ she asked kindly, as she noticed Lyara standing at the entrance of her den.

"\_Good morning Elder Tamaana."\_ Lyara politely began, and hesitantly explained her feelings to the old dragoness. She listened closely, and then began to examine her thoroughly, asking her to open her mouth, measuring her temperature by pressing foreheads together, and such. After she finished, the Elder took a suspicious glare at her, and asked:

"\_How frequently do you sleep together with Lohengrin?"\_

"\_You mean...?\_"

"\_Yes.\_"

"\_Oh.\_" Lyara mumbled, and blushed vividly at the sensitive question. \_"Umm... let's see... err... how should I say it... as often as we manage-\_"

"\_Because, you are pregnant.\_"

"\_... to sneak off- WHAT?! B-but... it usually takes years! And much more trial than we did!\_"

"\_There are exceptions my dear, and you are one of them.\_" Elder Tamaana smiled sympathetically. \_"This is not something one can predict, which can be both a blessing and a curse. It happens when it

has to happen. You are already in your second month." \_

"\_We've been together since two months..." \_Lyara murmured, thoughts wandering away.

"\_Well, the first time is always magical." \_ the Elder chuckled.

\* \* \*

><p>Lohengrin fumed in his irritation, as he walked inside of his cave. The sun was preparing to settle behind the mountains enveloping Toemnir valley, red rays stretching the shadows long. Lyara watched her mate from the comfort of their bed boulder.</p>

"\_How was your day?" \_ she asked.

"\_I don't even want to talk about it." \_ Lohengrin huffed. \_"I had a lengthy talk with Elder Ragnar. You can imagine what that means: He complains for like an hour, and then I talk for two minutes. Rinse and repeat. Spirits, I thought he'd never stop." \_ he settled down beside Lyara and nuzzled her. \_"Have you been at Elder Tamaana's?" \_

"\_Yeah... she told me I'm not sick..." \_

"\_That's always good to hear." \_Lohengrin smiled

She faced him, and stared into his eyes.

"\_We... are going to be parents." \_

The simple sentence blew up in Lohengrin's mind, scattering everything else all over. He opened his mouth, then closed, blinked and shook his head.

"\_R-really?" \_ he asked foolishly. Then a blissful grin beamed on his face \_"This... this is wonderful! I can't... by the Spirits, we are going to have a hatchling!" \_ He reached out with his forelegs and pulled Lyara closer, resting his chin on the top of her head.

"\_Lohen..." \_ Lyara mumbled, burying her face into Lohengrin's neck  
\_"What are we going to do?" \_

"\_We are going to be happy, that's what!" \_he laughed heartily.

"\_But... aren't we a bit too young for this? I mean, I don't know anything about being a mother, and-\_

"\_Shhh, listen to me." \_ Lohengrin whispered softly, and stared into her eyes. \_"This is something new and wonderful. Don't worry about being unfamiliar with it, you're not alone in this you know." \_

His comforting tone brought a soft smile to Lyara's face.

"\_I'm sure your parents would love to help us out, should we have questions about anything. I'm not worried at all." \_

"\_You're right. This is just so... new." \_

"\_Yeah, it is. How far you are?"\_

"\_In the second month."\_

Lohengrin hugged her even closer.

"\_I'm so happy, I don't have the words..."\_ he mumbled, his voice sounding suddenly shaky.

Lyara pulled back to see his face.

"\_Are you in tears?"\_ She asked, blinking rapidly at the sight.

"\_No! Of course not!"\_ he sniffed, and quickly wiped his face with a swipe of his paw \_"My eyes just... err... y'know, the dust, and-\_

"\_Save it."\_ Lyara purred, nuzzling Lohengrin's face lovingly, rubbing her nose to his.

"\_I am happy, too."\_

\*\*End of Part One\*\*

\* \* \*

><p><strong>AN: And with this moment, the part of this story called "Beginnings" stands closed. Many things happened, many questions were answered, many more were raised. How will Lohengrin's growing family look like? How will he end up in WW3? What will happen to... pretty much everybody? Stay tuned for Part Two: Scattered by Storm!\*\*

\*\*And as always: ask, comment, review.\*\*

I

I

I

V

## 11. Scattered by the Storm - prologue

\*\*A/N: This prologue picks up where the previous one left off. Just to avoid any confusion. ;)\*\*

\* \* \*

><p>Part Two: Scattered by the Storm<p>

Prologue

\_December 2nd, 2039. Val-de-GrÃ¢ce Military Hospital, Paris.\_

The snow was falling peacefully, gently masking away the battle scars of the city caused by the lightning-fast siege of the UN forces

barely a month ago. But even if winter was approaching, and the sky was cloudy and murky ever since, the people seemed indescribably relieved by the fact that the eight-year long occupation has finally ended, and they visibly tried to get some sense of normality back to their everyday life. As the frontline went farther away, the curfew was lifted; and the French provisional government tried its best to provide everything the people would need for pre-war life standards, as well as making optimistic plans for rebuilding.

However, the peaceful view was often disturbed by UN military patrols across the streets. The war wasn't over yet. At least, not for everyone.

A young man walked to the iron gate of the hospital, and greeted the guard.

"Lieutenant Colonel Walther von Hohenfels. I came to visit a member of my unit."

The guard checked something on his laptop, before answering.

"You're on the list, sir, clearance granted. Please note that standard visiting time is one hour, after that, a member of the security detachment will escort you out from the building."

"Understood." Walt nodded "Security is tight around here..."

"We can't take any chances, sir. Enemy agents could still operate within the city, and nobody wants to give them the opportunity to do something nasty. Morale is on short supply these days, we have to be careful."

"Not just morale, pretty much everything." Walt murmured "Thank you, Sergeant; I'll be on my way."

The guard saluted, and opened the gate. Walther walked inside the large courtyard, heading for the main entrance of the hospital. He has been here before, so he knew the way. He checked in at an other security officer in the entrance hall, and took the elevator to the third floor. He walked down the corridor, counting the doors, until he reached one with the following sign: "Quartier Auxiliare 6B"

As his hand touched the door handle, he suddenly heard sounds from inside. Like if someone was talking. He opened the door and stepped into the ward, which was relatively empty for its one resident. There were almost no furniture inside, save for a TV set on the wall, a large mattress in one corner, and a few pillows.

And a Night Fury, whose head was buried under the pillows.

"Lohengrin!" Walther exclaimed "Are you alright?"

"\_Turn that damn thing off!" \_He grumbled under the pillows.

Walther took a look at the television, which was the source of all the talking. Then he walked to the TV set and turned it off.

"\_Finally some peace and quiet!"\_ Lohengrin sighed as he pulled his head out. "\_Forward my regards to the nurses."\_

"Why, what happened?" Walther grinned.

"\_Apparently, one of them thought it would be a marvellous idea to turn it in so I won't be so lonely, as if I'm some kind of cute pet animal that needs constant attention..."\_ Lohengrin grumbled.

"And? You don't like the TV?"

"\_It's annoying beyond belief! Literally, there are only stupid advertisements on it all the time, occasionally interrupted with shows that don't make any sense and news which are full of deceit and flat-out lies! I tried turning it off myself..."\_

He pulled out the remains of a remote controller from under the mattress. By the looks of it, it was bitten in half.

"Hey, don't worry!" Walther laughed "I'm here to put you out of your misery!"\_

"\_And you came just in time; I was seriously considering blowing it off."\_

"I'm glad you didn't do it."

"\_Anyway" \_Lohengrin began as he sat down on the mattress \_"how's the situation?"\_

Walther walked up to him, and sat down on a pillow. He took a look at the battered dragon beside him. Half of Lohengrin's head was covered with a bandage, and surgical scars dotted his left leg and chest, where the surgeons had to remove shrapnel pieces. He didn't look too shaken about the events, his one visible eye beamed with curiosity as he glared at Walt, eager for news.

"The 2nd Armoured regiment took Cherbourg, and the remaining fanatics were evacuated through the Channel. The air force gave them a hard beating, but some of them managed to escape."

"\_It doesn't matter."\_ Lohengrin said in a tired voice. \_"The war for the mainland is over."\_

"Pretty much. We've stopped their advance at the Seine, and the counterattack chased them into the Channel. They still have a few holdouts in Normandy and the peninsula of Brittany, but those can be mopped up quickly." Walther agreed. "Only Britain remains."

"\_Only Britain."\_ Lohengrin echoed. \_"What about us?"\_

"Well, we are officially in reserve, for at least six months."

"\_About damn time."\_ Lohengrin rolled his eyes \_"We've been on the front for three years, I'd say we deserve some rest."\_

"Couldn't agree more." Walther smiled "They'll gonna transport us to somewhere peaceful in Normandy, and won't bother us for half a year. I think I'll go home. With some luck, I can make it home till Elza's

birthday."

"\_Do you have any ideas what High Command wants to do now?"\_ the dragon asked.

"I've heard some rumours. The US First fleet is on its way here, they have got a bunch of carriers and landing crafts. We have elements from the British, French, Italian and Russian navies here already. But with the fighting still going on in Mexico, Northern Africa and Asia... They may be planning an invasion, but we're still spread too thin. And nobody has successfully invaded the British Isles for almost a thousand years. And we have no idea how many troops they have stationed in Britain... I'd say the numbers are against us."

"\_They're still going to try it.\_" Lohengrin stated "\_If we knock out the main bastard from its fortress, his troops will lay down their weapons. It's our best chance to end this war within a year. I'm sure we are going to land next year, I just don't know how exactly they plan to get us involved\_."

"They probably won't." Walther lamented "There isn't much we can do during the landing itself"

"\_Damn it, Walt just look at what we've been doing recently! We are supposed to scout, go behind enemy lines and report what they are doing! That's why we have long range radios, comm stuff, and head cams instead of armour plates! But no, they send us to do infiltration, close air support, infantry and armoured support, sieges, frontline defence and a bunch of other things we aren't prepared or equipped for!" \_

"Look, Lohen, I know!" Walther said defensively "It's not my fault that the staff relies on us so much!"

Lohengrin took a few deep breaths, before speaking again.

"\_I'm sorry. I know.\_" he sighed, claws digging deep into the mattress \_"I just have a feeling that one day, they are going to send us to do the impossible, and we all bite the dust, no matter how hard we'll try not to. And sometimes I'm so sick and tired of this whole thing.\_"

Walther let out a deep sigh, and put a hand on his dragon friend's shoulder.

"Hey" he smiled "With just a tiny bit of luck, we might see the end of this."

"\_I'm not afraid of death.\_" Lohengrin whispered with eyes shut.  
\_"I'm afraid of letting \_\_\*\*her\*\*\_\_ down\_. "

\* \* \*

><p><em>December 11th, 2039. Gare Saint-Lazare train station, Paris.</em>

"\_I can't believe this!"\_ Flink fumed, as he tried his best to push the large crate onto the pallet \_"Last time I checked, we were Night Furies, not mules, neither trolleys!"\_

His younger companion let out a few huffs and puffs as he also gave the best he could to move the crate. The man behind the loader machine curiously watched the two dragons wrestling with the weight.

"\_Y'know..."\_ the younger Fury groaned \_"I've heard that all mules are at least NCO\*s..."\_

"\_If that's your heart's desire, Kiddo, I can arrange a promotion to you!"\_ Flink grinned \_"Stowage Sergeant Dieter, Commander of Crates, report for duty!"\_

"\_How is that after a bunch of missions and combat experience, I'm still the 'Kiddo' of the company?"\_ Dieter asked, sounding slightly annoyed.

"\_Because you're youngest, and you've joined later than everyone else!"\_ Flink explained, then began to laugh \_"However, if you don't like it, we can always call you FNG\*..."\_

"\_No thanks." \_Dieter frowned \_"Kiddo will do."\_

They moved the crate onto the pallet, and the loader went on to carry it to the cargo wagon. Both dragons were a little disheartened as they looked at the large pile of crates they still had to load into the train. Suddenly, an angry looking Night Fury appeared from behind the crates. He was a lot older than both of them, and on his blue scarf, he wore a tiny insignia of two silver pillars, next to the company insignia.

"\_Flink! Kiddo! Why isn't the ordnance loaded yet?!"\_

"\_With all due respect, Cap'n"\_ Dieter spoke up \_"Because they're heavy as crap!"\_

Captain Sautroy took a few steps closer, shooting a killing glare at the young dragon, who instantly regretted his earlier bravery.

"\_Looks like Flight Cadet Dieter is in need of some additional stamina exercise."\_ he spoke icily \_"Report at me after we're done here, so we can talk about how much you'd like to work out to finally reach the physical strength of a crippled Terrible Terror, understood?"\_

Dieter gulped. "\_Yes sir."\_

"\_Fabulous. Now, both of you line up at the waiting room to the left, with the rest of the company."\_

"\_Yes sir!"\_ Flink and Dieter barked, and jogged towards the waiting room's door. After a few moments, Dieter whispered a question to Flink:

"\_What's going on?"\_

"\_I dunno.\_" Flink answered \_"Maybe the boss is coming back..."\_

They went in to the room, and found the rest of the company sitting around and chatting.

"\_I can't believe we are the only ones who haven't finished with the-\_"

"\_On your feet and fall in, lazy newts!"\_ the captain yelled behind them \_"Form something that looks like a goddamn line!"\_

All eleven dragons stood silently for a minute, when the double door on the other side opened, and a huge Night Fury walked in, accompanied by a man wearing uniform. This was the first time they saw their commanding officer, after he's been injured doing the events at ChÃ¢teau Gaillard. Lohengrin had several deep scars stretching diagonally on the left side of his face, and the upper half of his left ear was missing.

"\_Atten-tion!"\_ Sautroy yelled again.

Lohengrin walked a few metres, looking over the line of Night Furies, before he raised his head and began to speak:

"\_At ease. Alright everyone, I have some good news and bad news. Bad news are, I'm back to torment you some more, even if I look like someone who tried to disarm a landmine by head butting it."\_ The dragons all chuckled politely, then Lohengrin continued. "\_Good news: In their divine wisdom, High Command and General Lisieux deemed that we are worthy for some R&R\*!\_"

The Night Furies all cheered and roared loudly, grinning at each other.

"\_That's right"\_ Lohengrin went on \_"After three years of frontline service; we are going to rest a few months before the next shitstorm we have to win again. After we're finished with loading this train, we head out with it to Normandy, to spend the next six months in some nice and cosy forest. The sooner the train's loaded, the sooner we go, so get on to it Furies!"\_

Everyone began to rush to the door leading back to the platforms. Captain Sautroy just shook his head looking at them, as he walked to Lohengrin.

"\_You seem to have a better way to motivate them than me.\_"

"\_Maybe that's why I'm the Major, Roy.\_" Lohengrin smiled. "\_Tell them to prepare for a seven hour train ride.\_"

"\_But it'll only last five...\_"

"\_I know. But if they prepare for seven, the whole ride will seem a lot shorter.\_" Lohengrin explained.

"\_Heh. Clever. Glad to have you back, Boss.\_" Roy nodded in appreciation.

"\_Glad to be back, Roy.\_" Lohen smiled back at him.

\* \* \*

><p>The sky was unusually clear for a winter night, Lohengrin couldn't resist gazing at the stars, as he laid on the top of the last wagon. The constant knocking and pounding of the train was actually quite calming for him. He barely noticed when a paw appeared on the edge, followed by another one and a head, as a Night Fury crawled out of the wagon, and sat beside him.</p>

"\_What's up, Daweryn?" \_Lohengrin asked the dragoness "\_Can't get any sleep?"\_

"\_Not really."\_ Daweryn sighed tiredly. "\_Train rides make me feel dizzy."\_

"\_It won't be long now, and then we can all rest. You'll even have time to visit home."\_

"\_That's... not going to happen." \_Daweryn blurted out after a brief moment of silence.

"\_Why?"\_ Lohengrin asked in surprise, turning himself to face her.

"\_Let's just say... my father and I had a disagreement, when I left. I fear he would try to keep me home, so I'm not going anywhere until this war's over." \_she explained hesitantly. "\_What about you?"\_

"\_Hm?"\_

"\_Don't you want to visit home?"\_

They sat in silence for a few moments, before Lohengrin answered.

"\_No. I have a few personal matters to settle in Britain. The reason why I originally enlisted is that I can't make it to that damned island alone. Other reasons came later, but... I'm not going anywhere too, until this war's over."\_

A sad smile appeared on Daweryn's face, as she looked up to the stars as well.

"\_How interesting. We two are the only ones who actually have a home to go back to; but we can't because the circumstances are against it.\_"

"\_You know, many years ago, a wise, old dragon told me that Fate loves jokes."\_ Lohengrin lamented\_ "It just has a weird sense of humour..."\_

\* \* \*

><p><strong>AN First, the a\*\*\*\*bbiverations:\*\*

\*\*NCO - Non-commissioned officer\*\*

\*\*FNG - F\*\*\*ing New Guy\*\*

\*\*R&R - Rest & Relaxation\*\*

\*\*So yeah, new part, new beginning. Lots of things are about to change, exciting things are about to happen! As always, read, comment, review!\*\*

I

I

I

V

## 12. Scattered by the Storm - Chapter 1

### Chapter 1

8 years earlier, somewhere in the Ural Mountains

The whole forest was blanketed in the soft shade of pure white, highlighting the deep blueness of the pond even further. Winter weather was always beautiful here, with the snow reflecting the enervate sunlight, whiteness and dark green varying on the trees and tiny icicles sparkling on the pine-needles, drawing up a very peaceful environment for anyone who decided to dwell within.

A dark shadow appeared on the mirror-smooth surface, as a young Night Fury leaned closer, her nose almost touching the water, eyeing the trout down below. She narrowed her eyes and flexed her muscles, concentrating on the exact moment when to strike. She slowly opened her mouth to reveal her fangs and took a deep breath, when...

When a large portion of snow landed on the top of her head, right between her ears, she let out a surprised squeal and almost tumbled into the pond.

"\_LENNY!"\_ She roared, and turned around, bearing a furious expression at the other young dragon, who not only ruined her attempt at fishing, but rolled in the snow laughing loudly at her.

"\_That was awesome; you should've seen your face!"\_

"\_I'LL KILL YOU!"\_

Upon seeing the charging dragoness, Lenny quickly jumped onto fours, and began to zigzag in the forest while still making the annoying tittering.

"\_Aren't you overreacting a bit, Nyssie?"\_ He grinned back at her.

"\_You're doing this to me all the time!"\_ She yelled in her chase  
\_"Just let me catch you, I'll bite your ear off!"\_

Lenny wanted to laugh again, but because he wasn't looking at the direction he ran towards, he crashed into something huge, black and scaly, and both of them tumbled into the snow.

"\_Lenhardt!\_" the dragon moaned under him.

"\_Hehe, sorry Dad."\_ Lenny chuckled, ears flattening against his head.

His father took an assuming look at him.

"\_What's with all the hurry? Were you-\_"

His question was cut off, as Nyssie crashed into Lenny, flinging him into the snow, and proceeded to make her threats real, biting hard into his earplate.

"\_Not again."\_ Lohengrin sighed, and took an apologetic look at the dragon he'd been having a conversation with a few seconds ago.

\_Please give me a few minutes, Salko.\_

"\_No problem.\_" \_Salkonyr nodded whilst trying to hold back his laughter, and began to walk towards the edge of the forest. Lohengrin turned back to the two younglings, and decided to step in before his son was suffocated by the paws of his own daughter.

"\_Laranys, Lenhardt! Enough!"

Nyssie slowly let go his brother's ear, stepped off from his neck and sat down beside him.

"\_He's terrible! Every time I want to hunt or fish, he shows up and ruins it!"\_ She complained.

"\_Telltale.\_" Lenny murmured as he sat up.

"\_You know, Lenhardt" \_Lohengrin voiced his disapproval "\_you should really find a different way to spend your free time than annoying your sister. How was this morning's hunting exercise, for example?"\_

"\_He failed to catch anything, again!" \_Laranys chimed.

"\_That's it. In the evening, we are going to talk with your mother, and you're going to take hunting lessons from her until Ohrana says you're making progress.\_"

"\_But... I wanted to go out with-\_"

"\_You can have all the fun you want with your friends, as soon as your mandatory matters are taken care of.\_" Lohengrin said strictly.  
\_Am I clear?"\_

"\_Yes, Dad.\_" came the cheerless reply.

"\_Hah!"\_ Larany grinned, earning a disapproving glare from her father.

"\_And you,\_ Lohengrin turned towards her\_...why do you have to make a scene every time he pulls a prank on you? The whole forest was blustering with your shouting!"\_

"\_But...b-but-\_"

"\_Patience is a virtue, Nyssie. And, if you knew that he wasn't performing well at the hunting lessons, why haven't you considered

helping him?"\_

"\_I-I...err..."\_ she mumbled, and lowered her head.

"\_Guys.\_ Lohengrin sighed tiredly \_"You are not hatchlings anymore; this is your fifteenth winter. Both your mother and I would be really happy if you'd start to act according to your age. Or..."\_a broad grin appeared on his face \_"...I will be forced to introduce stricter upbringing measures."\_

Both younglings dropped their jaws in their surprise, just as Lohengrin expected. With a wide swipe of his tail, he catapulted a huge batch of snow right into their faces.

"\_What the-\_

"\_Hey..."\_

Shaking their heads to get rid of the snow, the siblings forgot about their disagreements with each other as they stood up to two and launched themselves against their laughing father, nipping and patting him as they all tumbled over. The younglings began to laugh too, as they were wrestling and rolling around, spraying snow everywhere.

"\_Alright, alright!" \_Lohengrin chuckled, hugging his son and daughter tightly against his chest.\_"See? You can work together if you want. Now, let me go."\_

The siblings crawled off from their father, allowing him to stand up.

"\_I still have stuff to take care of"\_ Lohengrin explained \_"so you two run along now, and argue a bit less with each other, okay?"\_

"\_M'kay, dad.\_"

"\_Bye, Daddy!\_"

"\_See you home at evening."\_ Lohengrin nodded, and took off, heading after Salkonyr.

The two younglings watched their father's departure in silence, until Lenhardt hesitantly spoke up:

"\_I thought he was gonna be more upset..."\_

"\_About what?"\_ Nyssie asked.

"\_Y'know... about this whole hunting issue. The Leader's son, unable to hunt for shi-\_"

"\_Hey, hey, calm down!" \_Laranys tried to repose him\_ "When was he ever mad at us for something?"\_

"\_Well, there was that occasion with that bear..."\_ Lenny grinned.

"\_Yeah.\_" she sighed \_"But he was right about that. I still dunno

"what were you thinking..."\_

"\_I told you! It seemed like a great idea back then!"\_

"\_But apparently it wasn't!"\_

"\_Well... yeah."\_ Lenny smiled guiltily.

"\_Let's stick to the point."\_ Larany said \_"Daddy was right, I could try to help you out..."\_

"\_Really? Would you do that?"\_ Lenny asked eagerly, ears perking up.

"\_Maybe. But only if..."\_

"\_If?"\_

"\_If you ask me nicely."\_

Larany expected her brother to puff himself up, whinge something about pride and grumpily go away. The response she got however was exactly the opposite:

"\_Nyssie please, I'm hopeless! I wanna be good, help me, I beg you!"\_ Lenhardt pleaded to her.

Nyssie needed a few seconds for the shock to wear off, and close her dropped jaw. After that, she started to chuckle, but decided to be tactful, and only said:

"\_Let's go back to the pond and see how you do with fishing."\_

\* \* \*

><p>Salkonyr sat alone at the edge of the forest, waiting patiently for Lohengrin to return. Interruptions like this current one happened every now and then, but everyone showed patience, since they all knew that it's not as easy to attune family life with the day-to-day clan matters. And with the amount of work Lohengrin invested to take care of everybody else's problems, nobody ever thought about voicing a complaint.</p>

The loud rustle of wings interrupted Salkonyr's thoughts, as Lohengrin arrived and landed next to him.

"Eh, sorry." he apologized "Sometimes they get carried away with the sibling rivalry."

"Oh, no problem at all." Salko smiled "Are they giving you a lot of trouble?"

"\_The twins? No, not really. They behave themselves rather well; I just have to step on their tails every once in a while to make them mind their places."\_Lohengrin explained \_"Lenny's a clever boy, but he likes to be funny and he sometimes takes it further than he should. Nyssie is the calmer one, but when she gets pissed off, she can freak out royally if she wants."\_

"\_What a Daddy's girl." \_Salko smirked.

"\_That she is!"\_ Lohengrin laughed. \_"I'll never forget the day Lyara laid two eggs instead of one. We were overjoyed then overly worried about what if one doesn't hatch. We're so incredibly lucky to have both of them."\_

"\_Speaking of which, do you know how many families are envying you ever since? First clutch, two eggs, both hatch... that's quite a stunt to pull off. What's your secret?"\_ Salkonyr asked jokingly, earning laughter again from Lohengrin.

"\_I have a wonderful mate."\_ he answered simply \_"And hey, how much time does Faelynn have left?"\_

"\_A bit more than a month. I can barely wait."\_ Salkonyr grinned.

"\_See? There's a chance you two will get lucky too, one can never know."\_ Lohengrin chuckled, then he switchedto a more serious tone and asked: \_"Anyway, where were we exactly?"\_

"\_I asked you if you could inspect the newest Guard recruits tomorrow..." \_

"\_Right! Tomorrow I have a meeting with Elder Tamaana, but I can show up in the afternoon."\_

"\_That's perfect." \_Salkonyr nodded \_"I'll round up all the rookies and make a good show for you."\_

"\_Marvellous."\_ Lohengrin smirked \_"Anything else?"\_

"\_Actually, there is..."\_ the guard said slowly \_"Eienarth claims that he saw something strange yesterday night, during his patrol on the south-western perimeter."\_

"\_What kind of strange?" \_Lohengrin asked with narrowing eyes.

"\_Well... he said that he saw flashes of light on the horizon, accompanied by loud thundering."\_

"\_But the sky was clear yesterday night..."\_

"\_That's what I said to him, too. And that's why he didn't report it officially."\_

Lohengrin's gaze trailed away, as he thought over the issue.

"\_Storm would be the most logical explanation"\_ he began to think out loud \_"but that's impossible in the recent weather. I'm pretty sure he can tell the difference between lightning strikes and dragon fire, so we can rule that out too."\_

Salkonyr gave him a puzzled look.

"\_But then nothing remains!"\_

"\_Not so fast." \_Lohengrin shook his head \_"In that general direction, a day of flight south-southwest from our borders, there's

a human settlement."—

"—You think humans would cause this?"— Salko asked in disbelief.

"—I don't know for sure. I have no idea what they are capable of. Nobody has seen humans for centuries; I'm not even sure what they look like. You know what? Eienarth is on rest today, right?"—

"—Right."—

"—I'll send him out tomorrow, to go back to the spot where he saw this, and stay there for a day. Have one of your rookies accompany him. If both of them comes back stating that they saw the flashes again, we'll go out and investigate a bit. I don't care what happens outside our borders, but we can not discard a possible threat because it seems unlikely."—

"—Alright, but what would the humans want from us?"— Salkonyr frowned.

"—Our ancestors' policy towards them was to live and let live. I'm sure if we don't seek confrontation, they won't bother us. I just want to make sure."—

\* \* \*

><p>It was late night when Lohengrin finally arrived home, he had to add the visit to Eienarth and Naveron to his daily schedule, not to mention another bunch of smaller issues he took care of in-between. Now all he wanted was to settle down and enjoy the peace and quiet with his family.</p>

He landed at the mouth of his cave, and as he peeked inside, in the dancing light of the fireplace, he saw his younglings sleeping. Laranys curled into a ball, wings neatly folded and tailfin covering her face as she quietly snuffled in her sleep. Lenhardt on the other hand, was lying on his back with his wings spread, legs aimlessly dangling in the air, head slightly tilting to the side with his tongue sticking out, a puddle of saliva slowly gathering next to his head. Lohengrin chuckled at the sight of this, as he silently walked in. A few moments later, Lyara appeared, coming from the pool at the back of the cave. Tiny droplets of water glistened like diamonds on the scales of her chin. A warm smile appeared on her face as she noticed him.

"—I was starting to wonder if you ever come home."— She greeted him in a low voice.

"—I am sorry, I intended to finish earlier."— Lohengrin replied in a similar manner, as he walked to her, and nuzzled her face, nose slowly wandering up to her ear and purring gently into it.

"—Apology accepted."— Lyara sighed happily.—"You won't believe what just happened in the evening. Lenny and Nyssie both came to me, and explained that they are practicing hunting together. I was so shocked, I couldn't speak."—

"—I might have something to do with that."— Lohengrin chuckled —"I kind of scolded them today for always getting on each other's nerves,

and not helping the other at all. I have to say though; I haven't expected them to react this quickly, either."\_\_

"\_Well, it worked." \_Lyara smiled\_"It's good to see they're showing signs of adulthood."\_\_

"\_About time, if you ask me."\_\_

"\_Oh come on, let them enjoy their youth! Youngling years fly away quickly; they'll have enough chances to be all serious."\_\_

"\_I'm not the one to ruin any fun! I'd just like to see them helping sometimes, instead of causing more problems."\_\_

"\_You will, just give them some time. What will you do tomorrow?"\_\_

"\_Elder Tamaana asked me to help her organize a group to fetch some herbs and ingredients for her salves."\_\_

"\_Because Mom asked me if we could eat something together at midday... "\_\_

"\_That's not a problem." \_Lohengrin assured her. \_"We can go eat together, then I'll go to check how Salkonyr's doing with training the Guard rookies. I'll be home late afternoon."\_\_

"\_Sounds great."\_\_

"\_What about you?"\_\_

"\_I think I'll visit Faelynn." \_ Lyara smirked at him \_"She's pretty sad since you've banned her from hunting... "\_\_

"\_You hunters are insufferable!" \_the male grinned \_"She's expecting an egg, getting rounder by the day, she should be resting and preparing herself, but no, she wants to fly around, chasing stuff. The minute I dare imply to a hunter that they should slow down a bit, they freak out."\_\_

Lyara chuckled too, but she tried her best to stay quiet, not to wake the younglings up.

"\_Stop it, it's not that bad."\_\_

"\_Yeah, it's worse. I still remember the day when you were getting near to lay the eggs so I tried to convince you to stay home... "\_\_

Lyara shook from the suppressed laughter as she followed Lohengrin to their usual sleeping spot.

"\_... I had no idea you can roar that loud." \_ He continued.

"\_Look, I apologized later okay? And besides, we're laughing at it now! What would you say if someone would forbid you to fly?"\_\_

"\_I'd say: 'You're so dead.' And it's a completely different thing."\_\_

"\_You're terrible! \_Lyara laughed.

Lohengrin stepped forward, gently laid her to the ground and whispered into her ear as he settled beside her.

"\_Yes, I'm sooo terrible. That's why you love me."\_

"\_Cheeky bastard."\_ Lyara whispered back, gave a soft lick to his face as she snuggled close to him\_ "And by the way, it's true."\_

\* \* \*

><p>"<em>I'm freezing my arse off!"<em>

"\_Would you stop complaining already?!"\_

Eienarth and Volkownyr were sitting on a hill at the south-western perimeter, at the far edges of the territory of Clan Toemnir. Today's morning brought some clouds, but the cold was still bone-freezing. As he walked around, in an effort to keep his limbs warm, Volkownyr couldn't imagine how his first guard duty could be any worse. Eienarth and he were sent out here to keep an eye on the horizon for any unusual movements or phenomenon. As the hours crawled away uneventfully, Volkownyr became irritated by the unpleasant weather, and Eienarth became irritated by him.

"\_If you can't stand a little cold, go get back under your mother's wing!"\_ Eienarth growled, not even looking at his young companion.

Volkownyr just rolled his eyes, and decided to change the subject.

"\_Anyway, what are we hoping to spot here? Not that I don't enjoy the view of the endless wastes covered in snow..."\_

"\_We are hoping to \_\_\*\*not\*\*\_\_ see anything unusual."\_

"\_Like those flashes you saw yesterday?"\_

"\_Like... Do you see that?"\_

The young guard-aspirant looked in the direction the older dragon motioned to him. Black spots were moving relatively fast, followed by smoke trail, and something flew above them.

"\_What the heck..." \_Eienarth mumbled as he narrowed his eyes, trying to pick up the details from the huge distance.

"\_The flying one is coming towards us."\_ Volkownyr reported. \_"Can it be a dragon?"\_

"\_I... I don't know. It's too big to be a bird, but something's off with the way it's flying... It's like... a giant dragonfly."\_

As the contraption rapidly came closer, they could make out some details. It had wings, but it didn't move them. It made a sharp and rapid pulsating sound, and it grew louder and louder...

"\_This is unbelievable..."\_ Eienarth muttered.

"\_I think... we should get outta here!"\_ Volkownyr proposed in an unusually high-pitched voice.

The object stopped, hovering at a few hundred steps away from them. Now Eienarth could see small things attached under the object's stubby wings, which looked rounded from the front. There were two bubble-like, transparent shapes on the nose of the thing, one above the other, and it seemed like something was moving inside of the bubbles...

"\_Eienarth, let's get out of here!"\_

"\_Stay calm, there's no reason to assume-\_"

Eienarth never finished his sentence. Flames spouted out from under the object's wings, and a split-second later, explosions tore the whole hilltop apart.

\* \* \*

><p>Every once in a few years, Elder Zorhen came down from the Shalnar ridges, to take a look at how Lohengrin was managing the clan. Despite his thorny manners, Lohengrin always liked the old dragon, and frequently asked him to visit more often. Regardless of the welcome, Zorhen always came and went whenever he felt like it.</p>

Now the two were walking on the snowy plains of Toemnir valley, Zorhen eyeing every clan member he could spot, while Lohengrin filled him in about the events he missed between now and his last visit a few years earlier.

Lohengrin just finished an anecdote about a nomadic flock of Deadly Nadders, who asked permission to fly over the territory of Clan Toemnir, when Zorhen asked:

"\_And how are your kids?"\_

"\_They're both growing nicely. I thought about sending Lenny over to you for a season or two, so he could learn a few practical things."\_

"\_Assuming he is not a spoiled brat, we can work something out. But you have to teach him proper behaviour first."\_

"\_That won't be a problem." \_Lohengrin smiled \_"I intended to wait a few years with this anyway."\_

"\_What about Larany? Does she have an idea about the role she would like to fulfil?"\_

"\_She's a handy huntress, but lately she likes to spend time around Elder Tamaana, asking her about what's what. If she wants to, I'll let her to be an aide of the Elder. Maybe many winters later, she will succeed the Elder's place."\_

Lohengrin couldn't miss how Zorhen's ears twitched at the mention of Tamaana. His gaze wandered off, he looked like he's remembering something. Driven by curiosity, Lohengrin had to ask:

"\_What's wrong?"\_

"\_Hm? Nothing, I am just wondering if we are getting so old that you will need to find replacements. When I first met Tamaana, she was barely older than your daughter is now."\_

Lohengrin's eyes narrowed and he tilted his head to the side a bit, ears perking up.

"\_What's the deal with you and-\_"

"\_Lohengrin Valdr! Lohengrin Valdr!"\_

The panicking yell interrupted his question. He immediately turned towards the source of the voice, and saw one of the Night Guards rushing towards him.

"\_We've spotted something huge in the sky, heading straight this way!\_"

"\_Show me."\_ Lohengrin ordered, and took off, following the Guard towards one of the mountains which bordered the valley, Zorhen silently accompanying him. The Guard's choice of words caused some discomfort inside Lohengrin. Guards were trained to be able to measure a target's dimensions quite accurately from spotting distances. If a Guard says something's huge, then it's multiple times bigger than any Night Fury.

They reached a spot near to the mountain's top, and landed right away. The thing in the air was easy to notice: it was huge, grey, and was coming startlingly fast.

"\_A minute or two, and it's in fireball range."\_

"\_What in the name of..."\_ Lohengrin muttered, then turned to Zorhen  
\_"Have you seen anything like this before?"\_

"\_I have heard about creatures of the sea called whales, which look similar to this but whales don't fly. This thing has wings, although how they generate lift without moving them is beyond me... As if some force would send this thing forward."\_

"\_So you think that this isn't a living creature?"\_

"\_This could be one of those human contraptions, but the last time I was around those bipedal freaks, they knew nothing about flying."\_

The flying object became louder and louder as it neared towards Toemnir valley. Lohengrin tightened his jaw as he tried to come up with something. An unprovoked attack against something which turns out to be harmless is bad. Countering a potentially deadly threat early on is advisable. Finally, he turned towards the Guard, who was anxious to get an order to do something.

"\_Find First Guard Naveron, I'm ordering him to round up all his Guards! Third Guard Salkonyr and the guard aspirants shepherd everyone into the central cave system with all possible despatch!"\_

"\_Yes, my Leader!" \_the Guard barked, and launched himself into the air.

Looking back at the flying object, Lohengrin took a deep breath, and sent out a blazing fireball, barely missing the nose of it. The only reaction to the warning shot was that it tilted its nose a bit downer, gaining a bit more speed for the exchange of altitude. Aiming at those round things under the wing, Lohengrin shot another fireball, scoring a clean hit, bursting the thing under the object's wing on fire.

With one engine destroyed of the four, the plane continued along its course.

"\_Down you go, monstrous beast!"\_ Lohengrin growled, and prepared to shoot again, when Zorhen cried out:

"\_Wait!"\_

The object started to release some kind of greenish fog as it flew over them.

"\_The gas could be explosive! I'll take the shot!"\_

With that, Zorhen carefully aimed and let loose a fireball, which narrowly avoided the green cloud and exploded above the flaming wing of the object, tearing it full of holes. The hit caused the thing to slowly roll to the left, and it crashed into the northern mountain ranges around the valley, with the largest explosion the Night Furies ever heard.

During its way down, the plane left an enormous cloud of the green fume, and it slowly descended into the whole valley. It spread so fast, nobody could avoid inhaling it.

The gas burned Lohengrin's throat and made him gag, a disgusting green slime pouring out from his mouth. The realization of what happened struck him like a lightning.

He couldn't breathe fire anymore.

"\_Z-zorh... Zorhen!"\_ he groaned.

"\_I know!" \_the old dragon yelled\_ "Get the Guards ready, we are under attack!"\_

"\_See to it that everyone else reaches the central cave!"\_

Both dragons jumped down and hastily flew away, Zorhen heading east to the tallest mountain, Lohengrin descending to the centre of the valley. Reaching the clearing, he found every available guard in line.

"\_All five Wings are ready and waiting!"\_ Naveron reported to him.

Lohengrin tried everything he could to calm his panicking nerves. After a few heavy moments of silence, he spoke up:

"\_We need to know if hostiles are approaching. Take the Third Wing and fly above this cursed green mess. If you see anything coming at us, get down immediately!"\_

Naveron faced a group of Night Furies.

"\_You heard the order! Spread out and spiral up! We're making a circle above the mountains! Anyone sees anything, comes back here at once!"\_

The eight dragons took off, and quickly disappeared in the thickening green mist. Unfortunately, the wind wasn't blowing with enough strength to carry the fumes away, and it sat upon the whole valley, filling it like a bowl and pouring out at lower slopes of the mountains.

In a short while, Naveron hastily returned with the seven guards behind him.

"\_We saw a column of undefinable objects on the ground, heading straight toward the entrance of the valley! They'll be here in minutes. And they are definitely hostile too, they are shooting something like tiny rocks, one of them went through Raylandt's left wing, leaving a minor injury."\_

Lohengrin took a concerned look at the guard.

"\_Ray?"\_

"\_I'm fine. It hurts a bit, but it's small enough not to affect my flight."\_

"\_What about your fire?"\_

"\_We couldn't breathe fire even when we were above this fog. Seems like it has a longer term effect."\_

Lohengrin shut his eyes, and tried to force himself to stay calm. Whatever is coming for them, they managed to somehow strip them from their primary means of defence. This leaves only claws and fangs for them, while the enemy can still attack from long range.

"\_Where are they coming from?"\_

"\_From the south-southeast..."\_

Lohengrin exchanged a meaningful glare with Naveron. Both of them knew that it's exactly the same direction where Eienarth and Volkownyr were sent. If they couldn't get back with the news, it means...

"\_Alright."\_ he finally spoke up \_"The Second Wing takes position south from the entrance, the Fourth Wing to the north. The Fifth takes position in the riverbed, opposite of the entrance, while the First, the Third and I take off. We wait for the enemy to enter the valley, then attack them from every sides together. Once I give the signal, the ones at the side and above engage. When they are occupied with us, the Fifth leaves the riverbed and finishes the job. Second Guard Orlengiir leads the final assault."\_

With a few quick nods, everyone acknowledged the plan, and rushed to their designated spots. At least the enemy's plan had an undesired side-effect: the fog covered the dragons from enemy eyes, and they could hide behind the slopes and rocks of the mountains, in preparation for a nasty surprise for anyone who dares to enter their home.

Lohengrin, Naveron, and the fourteen guards of the First and Third Wings slowly circled above the entrance, always staying in the fog. In a couple of minutes, they spotted the approaching enemy. Rows after rows of humans, each carrying something which looked like black sticks, escorted by loudly rumbling, angular beasts of some sort, crawling slowly on the ground.

"\_ATTACK! ONWARDS, TOEMNIR OHREI!"\_ Lohengrin roared, and turned upside-down, beginning a dive into the middle of the enemy formation. With bellicose roars, the guards around the entrance all launched themselves towards the intruders.

\* \* \*

><p>Blasts echoed throughout the valley, and the ground constantly trembled. Horrid roars of pain and rage could be heard from the direction of the valley's entrance, and it only intensified the panic of the Night Furies inside the central cave. Hatchlings wailed, ignoring the comforting licks of their parents, elderly Furies sieged the Guards with never-ending series of questions, who tried to divide their attention to hundreds of directions at once.</p>

"\_Don't fall behind!"\_ Lyara warned her son, as they tried to force their way through the crowd. Lenhardt obediently followed his mother, who headed towards Salkonyr. The Third Guard looked quite busy, trying to maintain order in the panicking flock of Furies, and Lenny wasn't sure it's a good idea to approach him now.

"\_Salkonyr!"\_ Lyara tried.

"\_Give me a second..."\_ the guard gabbled, and jumped in front of a youngling \_"No, you cannot go out! I know that your parents are out there but you must stay here!"\_

Taking a look at the protesting dragoness, Lenhardt immediately recognized her.

"\_Let me try!"\_ he said to his mother, who gave a quick nod, then he approached the dragoness.\_"Selaryn!"\_

"\_Lenny!"\_ she cried out \_"Please tell me you know something!"\_

Salkonyr and Lyara watched as Lenny walked a few steps away with the young dragoness, quietly talking to her. Momentarily free from distractions, Salkonyr quickly asked:

"\_Can I help?"\_

"\_Have you seen Larany's entering the cave?"\_ Lyara asked desperately.

The heavy silence and the meaningful gulp only added to her

fears.

"\_I'm afraid not." \_he said slowly\_ "But I could've easily missed her in the crowd, and..."\_

"\_I tried calling her many times, I tried looking for her, I even asked almost everyone about her! All I know is that she was with Elder Tamaana this morning. The Elder said she flew away to catch a few fishes in the river, but nobody saw her ever since!"\_

"\_Look Lyara, I-\_

He was interrupted by startled cries. In small groups of two and four, black forms began to appear from the thick green frog. Salkonyr was about to order the recruits to prepare for a fight, when he figured out that fellow Night Furies are heading this way. He couldn't recognise their shape first, because many of them were carrying wounded, or flying erratically.

One of the returning dragons was Naveron, who instantly began to yell orders to the others. Salkonyr rushed to his superior.

"\_Naveron!"\_

The First Guard looked at him, and the sight took Salkonyr aback. Naveron was carrying some serious stab wounds, droplets of blood glistening everywhere he went. Even his wings were full of bleeding holes, how he managed to fly over here, Salkonyr had no idea.

"\_W-wha..What happe-?"\_ he tried to ask.

"\_We've lost."\_ Naveron growled darkly.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>AN: \*Dramatic music\*\*\*

\*\*'Nother cliffie!\*\*

\*\*Yeah, I know, I'm evil. ;)\*\*

\*\*As always, Ask, Comment, Review!\*\*

I

I

I

V

## 13. Scattered by the Storm - Chapter 2

### Chapter 2.

His senses were rendered to the state of almost complete uselessness. His vision was blurred by the constantly thickening fog, which was an

ugly shade of green at first, now it was getting more grey by the minute. As he crouched in the bottom of the small pit, the ground seemed to shake all the time. The loud thundering of detonations and the sound of violently barking gunfire tore into his ears causing him to be thoroughly disoriented. The air was heavy with the scents of dust, freshly spilled blood, and the sickening fumes and smoke left by the explosions.

Under any other circumstances, he would have considered to just run, without a glance back. Forcing himself to contain his panic and focus his mind on the two consciousnesses near to him, Lohengrin rocketed out from the crater he was crouching in, towards the two soldiers. Two heavy blows later, he let out the breath he was holding.

After a few moments, he heard screeches and roars coming not too far from him. He began to run, silently cursing the thick fog which limited the visibility to a few dozen steps. After a short while, he ran into a group of five dragons, trying to overturn one of those rolling metal monsters.

"\_Give me some room!"\_ he roared, and rushed towards the contraption. He slammed into the side of the thing, while turning his mental focus inward, he reached for the energies of his mind. He grabbed the underside of the metal contraption and struggled up to his hind legs. His muscles flexed, heart hammered inside his chest, and with a burst of energy and adrenaline, he roared out, and with the help of the other dragons, they flipped the vehicle to its side.

A hatch fell open at the backside of the APC, and soldiers inside tried crawl out, only to be greeted by half a dozen very angry Night Furies.

After the bloody work has been done, Lohengrin finally had the opportunity to observe the dragons around him.

"\_Orlen! What's the situation?"\_

Second Guard Orlengiir swallowed a few times to slow down his breathing a bit, then answered:

"\_Naveron retreated with the majority of the injured and the survivors, as you ordered. I think we're doing a good job holding them off, maybe if Naveron or Salkonyr could bring in fresh Guards, we-\_

"\_Out of the question!"\_ Lohengrin stated \_"If we are all what's left, then the rearguard retreats to the Central Cave as well!"\_

An indignant expression appeared on Orlengiir's face.

"\_The First Wing never runs away!" \_he growled in protest\_"We are not cowering weaklings to flee when the fight starts to get heavy!"\_

Lohengrin came very close to punch him in the face; he took a sharp breath and sunk his claws into the ground.

"\_The First Wing follows ORDERS!" \_he roared angrily\_"This isn't about pride, Orlen, this is about survival! We are vastly outnumbered and overpowered, standing our ground here would be suicidal, not

heroic! You WILL follow my orders and make yourself valuable by SAVING OTHERS AS I COMMAND, UNDERSTOOD?!"

"\_Yes, my Leader!"\_ Orlengiir barked immediately. Lohengrin wasn't happy about humiliating the Second Guard in front of the clan's elite, but desperate times require harsh actions.

True to their fame of being the best of the Guards, all of the First Wing was ready and accounted for. The only dragon Lohengrin missed was Elder Zorhen.

"\_Did anybody see-\_"

His question was interrupted by a large bulk of iron rolling towards them. The six dragons scattered into six directions, causing the tank to stop, as it slowly began to turn its turret, searching for a target. Lohengrin disappeared in a crater just a moment before machinegun fire raked the ground where he stood before.

The fire was so loud he could barely hear his own thoughts. The metal monster seemed to be able to pin down all of the dragons. His mind desperately raced, trying to figure out a way to deal with the thing when he noticed he's hearing a faint whistling sound.

The sound of the wind blowing through a diving Night Fury's wings and fins at high speed.

Lohengrin risked a peek out from the crater, only to see Elder Zorhen appearing above the tank. He arrived to the top of its turret with a huge bang, then jumped towards the nose of the tank, curled himself under the gun's barrel, and using the same method Lohengrin used to flip the APC, Zorhen gripped the barrel with paws and jaw, and began to forcefully bend it upwards. The hydraulics screamed as it tried to resist, but the Elder pushed the barrel up even more, and after a few loud cracks, he tore the whole barrel off.

Just as he dropped the barrel down to the ground, the turret hatch opened and a human appeared, aiming his submachine gun at the Night Fury. But Zorhen's reflexes were faster, and he knocked the human from the machine with a tail swipe.

Seeing the castrated fighting vehicle, the Night Furies roared victoriously and went into a ferocious counterattack. Fishing the rest of the crew from the tank was pretty easy, but necessary to ensure that the iron beast stay stationary.

"\_You alright?"\_ Lohengrin asked the old dragon as he reached him.

"\_I might have broken a few teeth, but nothing significant. I would advise to get back to the clan.\_"

"\_You read my mind.\_" Lohengrin nodded and turned towards the Guards.

"\_We're regrouping with the others at the Central Cave! Let's move!\_"

\* \* \*

><p>As Larany's tried her best to hide behind a boulder and look as small as possible, she also had to fight her panicking nerves. Today started pretty well, Elder Tamaana showed her how to treat a sprained limb in the morning, then sent her away to collect some willow tree bark for her painkilling salve. She was on her way back, just stopped at the river to drink a bit and grab a quick snack of trout when the uproar started. She faintly heard a Guard calling everyone to the central cave, when a monstrously huge flying something appeared on the sky, releasing the strange green fumes which now enveloped the whole valley. She saw the thing going down, and the ground-shaking impact scared her out of her scales, but shortly after that, came the thunders and blasts from the entrance of the valley, and now she had no way to move and not risk getting shot, burned or torn into pieces. A few minutes earlier, a Guard noticed her hiding, and tried to get to her. Now that she saw what horrendous injuries can these tiny rock-like projectiles the enemy's been shooting cause, all she was able to do was bite hard on her paw to prevent herself from crying out hysterically.</p>

The green fog slowly got darker and greyer, now she was barely able to keep track of the events in her surroundings. Sometimes she heard whiffs of talk, explosions, thunders and cries, but the constant vibration of the blasts messed up her senses so much, she couldn't even determine the source of the different sounds.

She curled into a tight ball, forepaws covering her ears and eyes shut, silently praying for the spirits of her ancestors that someone somehow end this nightmare. When she was a hatchling, her parents told her that monsters do not exist.

They were either wrong, or lying.

\* \* \*

><p>All the remaining Guards, together with Elder Zorhen and Lohengrin retreated to the clearing at the Central Cave's mouth. As soon as he touched down, a crowd of Furies rushed to Lohengrin, bombarding him with questions. However, one came rushing, forcefully knocking the others over to get to him.</p>

"\_Lohen, you're back!"\_ Lyara cried.

Lohengrin ran to his trembling mate, and tried his best to comfort her.

"\_Thank the Spirits you're alright-\_

"\_Laranys is missing! I can't find her anywhere and nobody has seen her coming to the cave!"\_

Ice-cold claws of dread gripped into Lohengrin's insides, as his mind processed the shocking information. He shut his eyes and allowed himself a few seconds of thinking. His clan is on the brink of disarray, everyone is wandering around aimlessly. Everyone's scared, lots of them are panicking, and nobody knows what should be the best course of action. His clan-mates and friends are dying in front of his eyes, and he's powerless to stop the onslaught. And now, his daughter is in mortal danger too.

"\_NAVERON!"\_ he roared. \_"Bring everyone who still draws breath

inside the mountain, now! Two Wings must guard the entrance; the rest must organize a column of the dragons and head into the tunnel network!\_

"\_How is that going to help us?"\_ Naveron asked.

"\_One of the tunnels leads to an exit on the other side of the mountain; it's our only way out of the valley! Send four dragons forward to scout ahead, and if it's safe, relocate the clan deep into the forest!"\_

For a moment, Naveron looked like he wants to protest, but then he swallowed and hesitantly nodded.

"\_Aye, my Leader."\_

The First Guard instantly began to bark orders, and everyone ran along to comply. Lyara turned to face Lohengrin again.

"\_What are you-\_"

"\_You go inside too. Is Lenny alright?"\_ Lohengrin interrupted.

"\_Y-yes, he's inside, helping Salko to keep the dragons calm..."\_

"\_Good, take him and go. Get out of the valley and into the forest as fast as possible! I'll go and find Larany!"\_

Lyara opened her mouth to protest, but Lohengrin took off instantly, and turned towards the direction of the riverbank. His heart hammered inside his chest as his wings pumped with strength he rarely used.

Nobody would hurt his daughter. Not if he can do anything about it.

\* \* \*

><p>Now that the Furies retreated, the valley was relatively silent " at least a lot less loud than it was like an hour ago. Lohengrin tried to use his hearing to find any traces of his daughter; the fog was getting thinner now, but the visibility was still limited. The green gas was also diluted by the smoke the humans made with their weapons, but it was not enough. What Lohengrin managed when he tried to shoot a fireball, was more like flaming snot than fire. He tried calling his daughter's name, but he only got a burst of fire from down below as an answer, which barely missed him. Minute after agonizing minute passed and he found it increasingly harder to control his crazy worry for his only daughter.</p>

Suddenly he heard his own name called, and turned back. Much to his surprise, he found Wordren racing up to him.

"\_Wordy! I've told you to-\_"

"\_The mountain's entrance is about to get overrun! We need you to help the Guards holding the humans at bay while the clan escapes!" he gabbled nervously, hovering not too far from him.\_

Lohengrin took a sharp breath and forcefully shut his jaw to prevent himself from roaring out loud in his despair. The Guards need him to lead them, the rest of the clan need him to guide them into safety, his mate would need him to keep his family together and safe, his son would need him to explain what to do and why, his daughter needed him to save her from falling into the hands of these vile two-legged freaks who would do who-knows-what to her...

He tried to be everywhere at once and failed. Now he has to make a choice. But he cannot.

Panting violently, he tried to say something.

"\_Look, Wordy, I-\_

"\_I'll go and find Nyssie!"\_ the older dragon cut in \_"But you have to-\_"

"\_Alright, ALRIGHT!"\_ Lohengrin roared, and dived back to the direction of the Central Cave. Wordren took a nervous look at him, then launched himself forward.

He descended as well, trying to fly as low and fast as possible without getting seen in the fog, desperately calling out for his granddaughter. He know very well that he doesn't have much time left, before the humans overrun the cave entrance, forcing the clan to disappear into the tunnels and flee out from the valley. Should that happen, he and Larany's are trapped in here, and can only hide until the fog dissolves.

After that, both of them won't be more than easy target practice. He made another vain attempt:

"\_Larany's! Larany's, where are you!"\_

When suddenly he heard something! Wings flapping crazily, he lined himself to the direction of the call, and began to dive. Powerful wind blew around him as he speedily headed downwards, then opened his wings wide...

Then there it was. Wordren lacked the words to tell what he's seeing. In front of him was another one of those human contraptions; it was able to roll on six round things, three on each side, two forward and four at the back. The back of it was completely flat, maybe for the purpose of putting other things on it, Wordy couldn't tell. Next to the contraption was a cubical thing, which reminded him of an angular ribcage, but this one had a flat top and bottom too.

And Larany's was inside the cage.

"\_Grandpa!"\_ she whined.

"\_Hold on, Little Sunshine!"\_ Wordy cried, took a quick look around to see if there are any humans in the vicinity, and then landed on top of the cage \_"Grandpa's gonna get you outta there!"\_

Clawing or biting the cage didn't work: it was made of a material much stronger than wood. It had a disturbing, metallic scent; he might have been able to blast it open, but the green gas still

prevented him from bringing together an effective fireball. He jumped down, and looked at the side of the cage. The distance between the grids seemed just enough to fit both forepaws against them. Wordy stood up to his hind legs, and began to forcefully push the two metal grids apart. He growled and mustered up all his strength; and the piece of metal slowly, very slowly began to bend to his will.

Laranys was so restless that Wordy felt the need to try to comfort her until he can get her out.

"\_I'm almost there, hold on a bit longer." \_

"\_Grandpa, BEHIND YOU!" \_she cried out.

A shot came. And another. Wordren felt a fiery pain spreading through his chest, but the sudden rush of adrenaline kept him going, pushing the grids apart even stronger. After the third shot, he felt his mouth has begun to fill up with blood, but he didn't turn back to see who's attacking him. The fourth shot made his vision blurry, but he still saw the tears rolling down on his granddaughter's face. The world began to spin around him, but the insane determination kept everything away and pushed the metal even harder.

After the fifth and sixth shots, his body began to betray his will. His eyelids became heavy, his trembling hind legs buckled, unable to support his weight anymore.

Laranys rushed up to her grandfather, and hugged him through the grid.

"\_This is just a dream!" \_ she sobbed hysterically, \_"We are going to wake up and you'll be fine! You'll be fine..." \_

She hasn't even noticed when a human raised his arm, holding an air gun at her. She hasn't noticed the dart sticking into her neck. As the world slowly fell apart by the sedative, she thought that she's finally going to wake up...

She was wrong.

\* \* \*

><p>Lohengrin raced back towards the mountain, where the rest of the dragons bunkered themselves away from the fire. On his way, he saw a few humans down below, with strange objects on their back, holding sticks that spat huge flames! He didn't stop to bother with the fire-blowing humans; the sound of heavy fire coming from the direction of the Central Cave worried him much more.</p>

The fog slowly diluted into patches of smoke, so he decided to try out his fire again. As soon as his mouth filled with his gas, he knew it's still not normal, the mixture was noticeably thicker than usual. Seeing a line made out of dozens of humans standing and firing towards the cave entrance, he dived towards them. Someone must have noticed him diving, as shots came, one of them hit the edge of his wing, tearing a small hole on it. He gritted his teeth but went on, levelled himself and tried out his flames on the column of humans.

He sprayed a continuous line of fire which enveloped the attackers, did a sharp turn to the left, and with a speedy half-circle, he flew inside the cave. His speed was too much to enter safely, desperate he spread his wings as far as he could, trying to show the largest area against the air as he could to slow himself down, as soon as he touched the ground for a running landing, his legs buckled. He painfully slammed himself to the ground, but luckily managed to tuck his wings before he started to roll, otherwise he would have broke them. Tumbling and rolling ungracefully, he skidded dozens of steps before finally stopping on his back, panting and hissing violently.

Furies ran over him, but he was on his feet in no time.

"\_Leader Lohengrin-\_

"\_What are we going to-\_

"\_They right at us-\_

As Lohengrin opened his mouth, a shell exploded inside of the cave, spraying stone fragments everywhere. One or two more came, only fuelling the panic of the Night Furies.

"\_We have to go, Lohengrin!"\_ Elder Zorhen shouted as he helped up his leader again.

"\_We... I... My daughter is still out there!"\_ Lohengrin groaned desperately.

"\_Get back to your senses! We cannot hope to hold out against this kind of firepower! I have instructed your son and your mate to lead the evacuation, they will be waiting you at the other side of the valley. But you must go, and escort the rest of the clan outside.\_"

"\_But...but-\_

"\_Lohengrin!"\_

"\_Give me some time to think damnit!"\_ Lohengrin roared. There was still at least thirty Night Furies in the cave, elder ones and hatchlings too. To avoid any more injuries, they have to leave in a somewhat organized way...

"\_Okay.\_ he panted \_"Orlen! Where's Orlengiir?!"\_

"\_Outside.\_ Naveron croaked. Lohengrin didn't need to ask what he meant by saying that.

"\_Then-\_

"\_Dad! Dad!"\_

"\_Lenhardt!"\_

Lenny rushed out from the tunnels, running to his father.

"\_Dad, did you find-\_

"\_What are you doing here?!"\_ Lohengrin interrupted.

Lenhardt's ears flattened to his head.

"\_I... came to help leading out the others..."\_

"\_Okay.\_" Lohengrin turned, addressing the crowd \_"Eight of you are going with him! Another six will be escorted out by Night Guards Raylandt, Selara, and me!"\_ then he turned towards his son again:

"\_Your grandfather is looking for Nyssie. You go and lead your group out into the forest. I'll be among the last who leaves, hopefully with Wordy and Larany, okay?"\_

Lenhardt gulped nervously.

"\_Okay..."\_

Lohengrin nuzzled his son.

"\_You're doing well, I'm so proud of you."\_ he whispered.

Lenhardt tried his best to appear all grown up and serious, not showing how scared he is. With a vague trace of his usual cheekiness, he managed to say:

"\_Don't keep us waiting too long, okay?"\_

With a feint smile, Lohengrin let his son go, and watched him disappear with a group of dragons into the tunnels. Shortly after that, the mentioned Guards also rounded up their groups, and began to lead them to safety.

Slowly but steadily, the cave around them gradually emptied, leaving only Elder Zorhen, First Guard Naveron, the First Wing of the Night Guard and Lohengrin inside. Lohengrin instructed his group of Night Furies where to go, and sent them ahead into the tunnels. Elder Tamaana was the last one to enter, shooting worried glances over the remaining dragons.

In the meantime, Naveron peeked out from the cave and rushed back almost immediately.

"\_A large group of them are coming this way and fast. At least two hundred humans, with half a dozen metal monsters escorting them. They'll be here in a couple of minutes."\_

Lohengrin swallowed tensely, as he tried to come up with another plan. He felt that his sleeve for tricks were running out for today.

"\_We just need to hold them off for..."\_

Elder Zorhen stepped in front of him.

"\_Get out of here Lohengrin.\_"

His tone was absolutely serious, with a matching expression on his face. Lohengrin dropped his jaw and looked over the Guards, who all

looked similar to the Elder. Even Naveron, who was badly injured.

"\_But we have to-\_

"\_Do not protest. We have already made our decisions. We stay here and buy enough time for you to lead the clan, our friends and families away to safety. Use my place at the Shalnar ridges to hide; it is close enough to reach in a day but far enough to be momentarily safe."\_

"\_I'M NOT LEAVING ANYONE BEHIND!"\_ Lohengrin roared.

Zorhen simply slapped him in the face. Despite the enraged look in his leader's eyes, he spoke absolutely calmly.

"\_Use your mind, Lohengrin."\_

Maybe because he had never been this upset in his life, Lohengrin could concentrate like never before. Closing his eyes, he felt the minds of the remaining dragons here, solid with determination and with silent acceptance of their fate. Reaching forward, he felt the disturbingly foreign consciousnesses of the humans inside the valley. Hundreds of them. Much to his horror, he couldn't sense Wordren anywhere, and Larany... her mind felt very weak and pale, almost as if she's...

Getting away.

Lohengrin's eyes snapped open.

"\_They... they-\_

"\_You must get out of here Lohengrin. There is nothing left here but death. She is alive, but appears to be captured."\_ Zorhen stopped for a minute, then slowly continued \_"There is no point in staying here for you. You cannot save your daughter by staying here or rushing out now, you have to find another way. The others will need you more. Go."\_

"\_He's right."\_ Naveron growled \_"The First Wing never flees anyway."\_

Again, the cold logic. Technically speaking, Zorhen was completely right. But can he, should he leave all these brave dragons to their fate? Is he worthy of their sacrifice? Why does it have to be like this? And Larany... the thought of leaving her in the hands of those hideous monsters felt like a stab deep into his heart. Gritting his teeth and lowering his head, he had to slowly accept the inevitable conclusion.

"\_Good luck."\_ he whispered.

Zorhen only gave an acknowledging nod, but a moment later, someone cried out loudly from the mouth of the tunnels.

"\_NO!"\_

Elder Tamaana ran to Zorhen, almost knocking Lohengrin off his feet. He shook his head and took a few steps back, trying to comprehend the

situation.

"\_What are you trying to prove here Zorhen?"\_ Tamaana demanded, tears rolling down on her face \_"You know that-\_

Zorhen stepped forward and nuzzled her, rubbing his chin against her forehead. Tamaana sobbed and threw her forelegs around the neck of the older dragon.

"\_I have done many things in my life I regret..."\_ he whispered into her ears \_"You... we were not one of them."\_

"\_Don't do this, I forgave you so long ago..."\_ she cried, burying her face into his neck.

"\_I know. I never questioned that."\_ Zorhen replied softly \_"But I have never forgiven for myself. I never really found my peace. But now I will. Let me go my love. Let me go."\_

Tamaana's paws slowly slid off Zorhen. The old dragon gave her a lick, then nudged her to go.

"\_The clan needs you."\_

For a long moment, they both looked into each other's eyes. Then slowly, Tamaana backed away. Lohengrin walked beside her.

"\_Follow me."\_ he whispered.

Both of them took a final look at Zorhen, Naveron and the Guards, before heading into the darkness of the tunnel.

\* \* \*

><p>As the two Night Furies disappeared, Zorhen turned towards the Guards around him.</p>

"\_Would you mind if I take charge?"\_ he asked from Naveron.

"\_Be my guest."\_ he said calmly, shaking his head.

Zorhen spoke up loudly, addressing all Furies in the cave.

"\_The effects of the fire-blocking gas are softening. The enemy will try to enter this cave in an attempt to flush us out. Let us give them a fiery surprise they will never forget! If this is to be our end, let us have them make such an end as to be worthy of remembrance!"\_

The Guards let out ferocious roars, and began to take positions around the entrance...

\* \* \*

><p>They switched on the flashlights, but they looked weak compared to the darkness of the cave. The commander signalled a halt, then reached for his belt, took off a frag grenade and threw it into the opening. It blew off a few seconds later, but nothing else could be heard. Signalling again to move forward, the commander took point and entered the cave. He looked to the left, and to the right, but

nothing could be seen. For a few minutes, there was nothing but an uneasy silence. Then, one of the soldiers got the idea of checking the ceiling too. The patch of light slowly crawled up on the wall, trailing along the ceiling, but he couldn't spot anything...<p>

\* \* \*

><p>As the trail of light stopped on his back and then moved away, Zorhen let out an evil grin at the stupid humans who can't see beyond their nose. The ceiling of the cave was full of stalactites; all the Furies were hiding amongst them, their black scales making them almost invisible ahead of the dark background.<p>

The attackers seemed to slowly let their guard down. Now was the time.

"\_Eyes open."\_ Zorhen whispered.

The Guards readied themselves, legs slowly switching positions, muscles flexing, wings extending.

"\_Attack on my mark. If things are getting out of control, we bring the whole cave down on them.\_"

Zorhen took a deep breath in and closed his eyes. Then roared.

"\_ONWARDS, TOEMNIR OHREI!\_"

With thundering roars and sprays of fire, the dragons jumped down from the ceiling, into the middle of the crowd of unsuspecting humans. With such ferocity and zest only those who have nothing to lose were able to muster; the Rearguard of Clan Toemnir began to fulfil their promise.

And gave hell to the enemy.

\* \* \*

><p>The ground trembled under their paws as they ran through the tunnel network, always heading for the light. The trembling got harder and harder, sounds of explosions came from behind, and for a moment, Lohengrin was sure they wouldn't get out of the mountain in time. But fortunately, the narrow tunnel came to an abrupt end, and both he and Elder Tamaana were outside the valley. They continued to run on the snowy ground, towards the large pine forest, where the others from the clan hid.<p>

Avoiding answering all the questions he had been bombarded with, Lohengrin tried to organize everyone into a formation so they can fly to safety. But his efforts were in vain. Everyone was tired, shaken, worrying or even injured, which made his work unbearably hard. So he spent a lot of time running from one group of dragons to the next, convincing them to let go of everything and prepare to move out.

"\_Ohrana! Ohrana listen to me! Ohrana!"\_ he shouted with a dragoness. She was seriously injured, a fragment of a cave wall caused by an explosion hit her left eye, and now she was half-crazy with the shock, pain and dread.

"\_There's no point, I'm useless!" \_she cried\_ "I can't fly now, I can't hunt, I'm nothing more than a liability! Another mouth to feed! Leave me here-\_"

"\_NO!"\_ Lohengrin roared, his throat was sore from all the yelling he had been doing the past few hours. He has never been as tired in his entire life as was at then, but he still had to overcome obstacle after obstacle. \_"Listen, flying with one eye is possible, you will need a lot of practice at distance measurement, but it's doable! We can't afford to lose more dragons, your experience is invaluable whether you fly or not!"\_

He spent almost an hour, trying to reason with dozens of Furies. But no diplomatic abilities, sense of empathy or health knowledge prepared him for what was about to come. When Lyara rushed to him. When she hugged him close, silently thanking the Spirits that he was more or less unharmed. When she fearfully asked:

"\_Lohen... Where's Wordy and Nyssie?"\_

Lohengrin opened his mouth in an effort to say something, anything... but Lyara didn't get an answer, just a very tired and sorrowful look, which spoke more than anything he could have said. Lohengrin felt like his heart was being torn out, as he had to watch the dragoness he vowed to protect and keep happy, fall apart with dread and grief over a family, which would never be the same again.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>AN: Okay, I kinda feel sad now. Next chapter will be a bit brighter, I promise.\*\*

\*\*AskCommentReview? :3\*\*

\*\*I\*\*

\*\*I\*\*

\*\*I\*\*

\*\*V\*\*

#### 14. Scattered by the Storm - Chapter 3

Chapter 3.

Within three hours, there were no Night Furies in visual distance from Toemnir valley. However, Lohengrin's problems only intensified after he got everyone up and flying.

He had to organize a formation out of his clan; and with dragons aren't used to flying in a group of fifty, it was not easy at all. He had the youngest and oldest Furies going in the middle, while adult dragons were around them in a circle, with Guards scouting in front, behind and above the formation, distant enough to have room for manoeuvring but close enough to be there where help is needed. The twenty hours long flight was quite an endurance round for everyone: many dragons were injured or very tired even before they took off,

even more were either too old or too young to fly such a distance in such a hurry. So everyone was more than relieved when the Shalnar ridges began to appear, since almost everyone's wish was to just land somewhere flat, collapse, and drift into a weary slumber.

But they couldn't do that. Once the clan arrived and Lohengrin showed them a few caves they can take shelter in, Lohengrin had to summon everyone who had some strength left and he gave them tasks such as fetching food, helping the old and the injured, and send patrols and lookouts to certain high vantage point for the sake of safety. Lohengrin himself tried to be everywhere: he took part in the hunts, he helped Elder Tamaana treating the more serious injuries, and he relieved Guards who were on the lookouts, so at least they could get some sleep.

But the price for this was to neglect his family when they would need him the most, and this only added to Lohengrin's already intense feelings of guilt and shame. Even the clan as a whole started to show subtle signs of recovery, he felt horribly torn inside, in addition to the depressing exhaustion.

He saw Lenhardt a few times, and it was obvious to him that his son was trying to deal with the trauma by occupying himself with everything he can. He and other younglings were on search for herbs and ingredients for Elder Tamaana, sweeping caves with torn-off pine branches to make them more suitable for residence, fishing to help feed hatchlings and so on. Lohengrin had mixed feelings about this. As a Leader, he was really proud, that his son is trying so hard to cope with the events and help the others around him. But as a father, he was full of concern, for Lenny wasn't anything like he used to be. He was unusually quiet and serious, and no serious appearance or faint smile could hide the sadness in his eyes. Lohengrin knew that Lenhardt was just as depressed as he was, despite all the efforts to not show it. It would've helped both of them if they could have a chance to talk... But they haven't.

By the end of his second sleepless day, Lohengrin felt like he had never been this tired before in his life. As he landed at the entrance of the cave where his family was, he had to stop after stepping in, and just leaned against the wall and shut his eyes to stop the world spinning around. It was late night, he haven't expected anyone to be awake.

To his surprise, his son walked out from the sleeping chamber, and as he noticed him, he hurried over to him.

"\_Dad?" \_ he asked quietly \_"You alright?" \_

Lohengrin slowly sat down, still leaning to the wall.

"\_Been better." \_he sighed \_"But I'll be fine.  
Son..." \_

"\_Yeah?" \_

"\_C'mere." \_

Lohengrin raised a wing, and as Lenny sat down beside him, he curled it over to cover him.

"\_You made me really proud these past few days. You showed hope to those who had little to none, and lots of dragons noticed that.\_"

Lenny closed his eyes as he leaned against his father's shoulder.

"\_I just... I just tried to make things right.\_" he mumbled.

"\_And that you did. How's your mother doing?"

Lenny's eyes opened, and he took a worried glance towards the smaller cave he came out, before looking into his father's eyes. He swallowed before saying:

"\_Not... well. I've tried to comfort her a bit, but... I just don't know what to say.\_"

"\_Me neither.\_" Lohengrin sighed "\_Because there is nothing anyone can say. I lost both of my parents when I was less than two months old, and I still remember it like it was yesterday. A loss like this cannot be cured by a few words, there are no words which would not sound empty and meaningless compared to it. But what did help to me, is that I felt I'm not alone. And we have to help both her and your grandmother to realize that they don't have to deal with their pain alone.\_"

Lenhardt was silent for a few moments, thinking.

"\_I think I'm gonna go to Grandma's place..." he said finally "\_She shouldn't be alone either. I'll sleep there and come back at morning, okay?"

"\_Sure.\_" Lohengrin nodded, and lifted his wing off him. \_"Keep it together Lenny.\_"

"\_You too, Dad.\_" Lenny bumped heads with him then went outside.

After a weary sigh, Lohengrin entered the cave where Lyara was. She was curled into the corner on the far side, and although she made no sound, Lohengrin saw her sobbing. He quietly approached her, and nuzzled her head. When he got no response, he settled down next to her, and gently raised a wing above her. Then she suddenly moved, and threw her forelegs around Lohengrin's neck, burying her face into his scales.

Lohengrin soothingly licked her ears a few times, occasionally whispering:

"\_Let it out. Let it all out, my love..."

\* \* \*

><p>A few hours later, Lyara woke up from her uneasy slumber. As she felt her head slowly rising and falling together with her mate's chest, she held her ear against it to listen to his heartbeat. The slow but steady pace of the beating helped her to collect her thoughts.</p>

She heard a soft mumble, which made her to raise her head up. Lohengrin was asleep, but as Lyara saw his ears twitch and a paw flex a few times, she knew that the dreams weren't kind to him too. She put her paws on the ground and moved herself forward a bit. Then she began to softly lick her mate's face.

Lohengrin's eyes slowly opened.

"\_Lya..." he whispered drowsily.

"\_Lohen..." she rubbed her forehead against his chin, in response Lohengrin stretched his wings and folded it around her, hugging her tightly.

They lay silently for a while, caressing and occasionally licking, seeking solace in each other's presence.

"\_I'm so sorry..." Lyara mumbled.

"\_Lyara..."

"\_I completely fell apart... And ignored everyone else..." her eyes became watery again "\_I...I can't imagine what kind of hell you went through..."

Lohengrin pressed his forehead against hers.

"\_Lya. Don't make things even harder for yourself." he said with a soft look in his eyes "\_I understand exactly how you feel, so I can't blame you for anything."

Feeling a tiny bit better, Lyara sunk back to her mate's chest. After a few silent moments, she spoke up again:

"\_I can't recall what Lenny said about where he's going..."

"\_He's with Melyan for tonight." Lohengrin answered.

Another few moments of silence.

"\_I should be there too..." Lyara whispered.

"\_Maybe." Lohengrin said "\_But it won't help if we all sit beside her and cry together. She needs time to process this, and we should visit her, but not right now. None of us can offer her anything that Lenny couldn't. What we should be doing now, is trying to focus on what comes next. There's nothing else we can do."

"\_Right..." Lyara murmured "\_So, what's your plan?"

"\_This place offers us a temporary shelter. We need to reset the clan's life into normality again, then I want to check what's left of home."

"\_You want to go back?"

"\_If the humans don't stay there, I want to. We are missing twenty-seven Furies, I want to find out what happened to them for sure." \_

Lyara raised her head again to look into his eyes.

"\_You think they didn't kill everyone?"\_

"\_I have my suspicions. But I don't want to say anything until I've seen some sorts of proof." \_

\* \* \*

><p>The boar grunted a few times, as he dug his nose into the pile of snowy leaves and twigs, continuing his search for acorns. Cool chills of wind brushed through the trees in the early morning, and the snow sparkled with the rising sun's early rays. The boar, being driven by hunger, paid no attention to his surroundings, up until he heard a soft crack coming from the bushes a few dozen steps away from him. He took a panicking look to the direction of the sound, then his instincts told him to flee, so he began to run in the opposite way.</p>

A blue-purple explosion tore the ground apart in front of him, spraying molten snow and mud everywhere. Blinded by the flash, the boar screamed and turned around...

When something black and scaly landed on his back, sinking its claws deep into his hide to get a firm grip. With a snarl, the young Night Fury ferociously bit down on the boars neck, and held himself tightly on it, as the boar flailed violently, trying to shake the attacker off.

As the struggle depleted his air reserves, the boar began to slow down and tumble to the ground. With a quick swipe of a paw, the dragon ended its prey's misery.

"\_Nice catch, Lenny!"\_

Lenhardt slowly got off from the boar, and turned towards his smiling mother.

"\_I still screwed up my approach..."\_ he panted \_"I stepped onto something and it startled it. If you didn't fire in its way, it would've gotten away."\_

"\_You are right"\_ Lyara nodded \_"but this is the reason hunters prefer to work in groups. It multiplies the chance of success. And the way you ended the hunt was spot on."\_

A sudden sense of pride beamed through Lenny's heart, and he began to smile too.

"\_When we practiced together, Nyssie said I'm not entirely hopeless-\_"

Realizing what he's saying, he bit off the end of his sentence, but the damage was already done. Lyara's smile disappeared, and a deep sorrow appeared in her eyes as she sat down. Silently cursing his foolishness for touching a wound which is still far too deep and vivid, Lenhardt rushed to his mother and rubbed his nose against her neck in an effort to comfort her.

During the last few days, Lenhardt tried to deal with the absence of

his sister by simply not thinking about her. The moment she slipped into his mind, he felt a lack like never before. They shared every important aspects of their life so far, and Lenny was so used to her presence that...

"\_I don't want to believe she's gone."\_ he mumbled to himself.

Lyara took a step back and stared into her son's eyes.

"\_Until we've seen something that would tell otherwise, she's just not here and nothing more.\_" she said strictly \_"We must preserve the light of hope if we want to come out of this sane. This isn't self-delusion, we have no idea what happened to her or to the others, so they shall be regarded as such. And-\_

"\_Mom.\_" Lenny interrupted softly and nuzzled her again \_"We have to keep it together, I've got it.\_"

Lyara closed her eyes as she nuzzled back her son. They were silent for a few heavy moments, then Lenny spoke up again:

"\_Let's take this boar back to the clan.\_"

His mother lovingly licked his face, and her voice was filled with warmth again as she said:

"\_I appreciate your efforts, Lenny. And yes, lets bring the food back to the others.\_"

\* \* \*

><p>"Why have you called me here?"</p>

Lohengrin stood in the Hall of Enlightenment, looking ad Elder Ragnar's back, who seemed to examine the ancient runes on the wall. Lohen shifted impatiently, thousands of other, more urgent matters raced across his mind but he had to answer the Elder's call, who might have something important to say. He was not the one to turn down counsel, but Ragnar was more the elder of thoughts than action, unlike Zorhen was. Lohengrin would've preferred his guidance, but...

Zorhen wasn't available anymore.

"\_Because\_" the old dragon spoke up, interrupting Lohengrin's dark thoughts \_"I can sense your turmoil, and I hope give you some advice that should help clearing your path.\_"

Lohengrin took a sharp breath, and sat down, tail curling tightly around his legs.

"\_So far"\_ the elder began \_"you have done an admirable job arranging the clan's matters. Despite your own personal losses, you show no falter to the ones surrounding you, and you are doing your best to keep your clan from falling into despair. But anyone who has the eye to see it, can see that you are terrible conflicted inside about what should be the best course of action for everyone. You are constantly forced to choose between the well-being of your family, and your clan. It is a burden nobody should bear, but your emotions about it blind you from the obvious.\_"

"\_Could you stop speaking in riddles?"\_ Lohengrin growled.

"\_In other words"\_ Ragnar went on with a chatting tone \_"you are acting like any other Leader would do in your place."\_

"\_Where's the problem with that?"\_

"\_It is not the best thing to do."\_ the elder stated \_"Unusual situations require unusual ways to deal with them. This current crisis is vastly different than anyone from this clan ever saw, if you try to handle this like any other disasters, you will end up failing either the ones you love the most, or the ones you have sworn to protect."\_

A strange mixture of confused anger surged through Lohengrin, but he inhaled deeply with closed eyes to keep himself calm.

"\_So?"\_ he managed to ask.

"\_What I am trying to tell you, is that do not hesitate to make a decision which would be unprecedented. You are different than any other Leaders I have ever had the honour to meet Lohengrin. Like many in your family before, you are destined to fly above different paths than most of us ever do."\_

"\_What makes you think I'm different than my predecessors?"\_ Lohengrin asked, being more curious now.

"\_Your eyes tell all that one needs."\_

Lohengrin tore his gaze away from the elder. He hated when others commented that his eyes were blue instead of green. Like a mark of Fate itself, it was a trait which haunted him since the day he was born, and he hated being different than the others around him. He had never wanted any of this. When his hatchlings were still inside their eggs, Lohengrin prayed to the stars, and he was relieved when he saw that none of them inherited his eyes.

"\_Lohengrin."\_ Elder Ragnar said \_"Your fate and traits bear resemblance to those who came ages before you. To those who played the most significant roles in the history in our kind. They all faced troubles like never before and they all conquered them in their own way."\_

"\_So..."\_ Lohengrin looked at him again \_"you're suggesting that I should listen to my instincts and use my own foresight instead of logic and knowledge?"\_

"\_Exactly."\_ Ragnar nodded with a smile.

"\_I..."\_ Lohengrin was unsure what to say\_. "I'll think about what you said."\_

"\_That was all I have asked for."\_ Elder Ragnar assured him, as he walked out from the cave, leaving Lohengrin alone.

\* \* \*

><p>Salkonyr watched his fellow Guards in training. Certain dragons

were lifting broad logs from the ground as exercise, while others were practicing claw-to-claw combat against single or even multiple opponents. Their current training emphasized claws and fangs more over fire in fighting, which was a new idea, born from the experience of the recent disastrous events. As Salkonyr watched over the training Guards, his heart became heavy with sadness.<p>

There were so few of them left.

The most experienced and overall strongest Guards have all fallen during the defence and the hasty evacuation of Toemnir valley, including the leadership. Every time Salkonyr tried to face the fact that now he is the highest ranking Guard, he had to shudder. He had never even considered himself being on the same level as Naveron, Orlengiir, or even Wordren were.

He stood silently as Lohengrin landed next to him.

"\_New training pattern?"\_ Lohengrin asked quietly, after observing the scene in front of him.

"\_Yeah." \_Salkonyr replied "I think we should be ready if the humans decide to use their fire-blocking trick on us again."

"\_Good idea." \_ Lohengrin nodded \_"I'd like to formally appoint you as First Guard of Clan Toemnir."\_

Salkonyr gulped nervously.

"\_I guess I don't really have a choice..."\_

"\_Of course you have." \_ Lohengrin explained \_"You can refuse my offer if you give me someone who's more competent than you. Thing is, the list of possible candidates are pretty short these days."\_

"\_True." \_ Salkonyr sighed \_"I accept; despite that it makes me the youngest, most inexperienced and..."\_

"\_Salko!" \_ Lohengrin interrupted \_"Age doesn't have anything to do here, and you have proven yourself over and over during the years. This whole scene here proves that you are fit for this duty."\_

"\_Maybe. I'm just not sure if it has any point... I mean, the humans came and we gave our best shot against them. It was barely enough to escape with our lives. Should they want to finish us, I don't think we could stand a chance."\_

"\_Salko..."\_

"\_What if this means how far \_\_\*\*they\*\*\_\_ have come?"\_ Salkonyr asked desperately \_"What if this means that our kin's time is coming to an end? What if we will be overpowered and forced to disappear by a younger and more powerful race?"\_

"\_Who has the right to tell who deserves to live and who doesn't?"\_ Lohengrin asked back \_"I certainly don't; and I won't accept any mortal being's cast of judgement on me or my kind! We have a much longer history than the humans and we have ridden out many storms. This is just another one. And if we can't defy the storm, we will

seek shelter from it; either way, we are the masters of our own life, and will never let anyone or anything to tell us whether we should go down or not!"\_

Hearing the outburst, Salkonyr took a step back and lowered his head.

"\_You are right. I apologize, my Leader."\_

"\_You don't have to."\_ Lohengrin sighed \_"All of us are shaken, Salko. But we must not let ourselves fall apart under the pressure."\_

"\_Understood."\_

"\_Alright."\_ Lohengrin nodded \_"I came to ask for two Guards who will accompany me to Toemnir valley."\_

"\_You want to go home?"\_ Salkonyr asked in surprise.

"\_We are missing many dragons whose fate remains unclear, and I want to see the damage done to the valley itself. This place only accommodates us temporarily, and I have to see what are our options before planning what should come next."\_

"\_Right."\_ Salkonyr acknowledged, sounding more sure now as he had a task now \_"I'd like to come, but"\_

"\_You have to stay here to defend the clan."\_

"\_I know. I'd recommend Selara, she's one of our swiftest fliers."\_

"\_I agree."\_

"\_The second one would be Garenald. He missed most of the fight, and is eager to do something. And if I recall correctly, you two get along well together."\_

"\_Right."\_ Lohengrin nodded \_"Tell these two to meet me tomorrow at dawn, at the hilltop to the south. We are going to approach the valley with stealth, and if there's no danger, we sneak in and take a look around. We fly fast, keep a low profile and be back before someone would notice."\_

"\_Understood."\_

A few minutes later, Lohengrin was almost at his family's cave, when he spotted his mate and son coming back too. As they came together, they began to exchange information about the day's events, and Lyara couldn't miss the opportunity to comment on Lenhardt's apparent improvement in hunting. It was worth it, as it drew a smile to Lohengrin's face, which happened very rarely recently. But when Lohengrin told them about his upcoming trip to Toemnir valley, both of them became worried.

"\_I'd like to come too!"\_ Lenny said.

"\_That's entirely out of the question!"\_ Lyara stated strictly  
\_"You're-"\_

"\_I'm not a hatchling anymore!"\_ Lenhardt protested.

"\_But you-\_"

"\_Hey, hey, HEY!"\_ Lohengrin stepped in, and turned towards his son.

"\_You're staying here, and let me explain why.\_ Lohengrin said upon seeing his son's defiant expression \_"While I am gone, I'd like you to be my eyes and ears here. In other words, you'll be the Leader for those two days.\_"

Lenhardt stood wordlessly, with jaws dropped. Lyara seemed to have her own concerns with this idea as well, but she remained silent.

"\_Look, I know this seems like a lot to place on him\_ Lohengrin explained to both of them \_"but should Lenny be in doubt about something, First Guard Salkonyr and every Elder have agreed to help him if needed. And it's only about two days. Consider it as a bit of a practice.\_"

"\_Ooo-kay.\_ Lenny mumbled, and slowly walked into the cave.

Lohengrin watched his son go, then looked at Lyara who shot a questioning glance at him.

"\_I know this face of yours.\_ she said assumingly \_"You have another Mighty-Leader-type of plan in your mind, haven't you?"\_

"\_What?"\_ Lohengrin asked, ears flattening to his head.

"\_Like the one that got rid of the Skrills fifteen years ago?"\_

"\_Oh. Hey, I promised to not do that again!"\_ Lohengrin protested, but then he gave a faint smile \_"But I am starting to work on some sort of plan.\_"

\* \* \*

><p>Lohengrin felt a barely resistible urge to cry out and roar his despair to the stars above.<p>

He, Garenald and Selara arrived to the valley at dusk, and as they looked around with the red rays of the setting sun giving a final look at the place they used to call home, all of them felt like a piece of themselves are slowly disappearing with the fading sunlight.

They glided into the valley and began to thoroughly look around, but every passing minute they spent doing so, the weight of sorrow on their souls felt heavier and heavier.

Where the glade used to be, which was littered in flowers during spring and covered in a thick layer of snow during winter, giving a playground for hatchlings, was a smoking, black, barren wasteland, devoid of any life. Where the entrance used to be, which linked their

world to the one outside, was a graveyard of scrap metal and dead bodies. Where the enormous aspen used to be, which survived every storm and trouble for ages, there was only a burnt chunk of coaly trunk. Where the Y-shaped river used to be, which fed them, quenched their thirst and kept them clean, there was a greyish slipslop of mess which tasted anything but water.

The mountain which housed the Central Cave collapsed into itself. The cave entrance was nothing more than a pile of rubble.

And the whole valley was littered with filth, ugly remainders of the human fighting vehicles and dead. Lots of dead. Every fallen dragon they've found multiplied their grief, and not before long, all three of them had tears rolling down their faces only to be drunk by the tortured soil under their paws.

Lohengrin stood in front of the cave he used to call home. While it remained somewhat usable, it had little chance to have residents ever again. The place that once used to be Toemnir valley seemed like the way it was now, Lohengrin wasn't sure if the place can become liveable once again.

With a rueful sigh, he entered his former cave, and walked to a certain spot at the stone wall. A long time ago, he decided to heat up a spot till it melts, and pressed a certain blue lazulite into the stone so it can have a permanent place. Now, as he pressed a claw against the edge of the gem, it popped out from its place easily.

As if it would feel that it doesn't belong to this place anymore.

When he finished and took a look around again, he spotted something strange. Following a strange trail on the ground, he eventually found someone he hoped to never see that way.

Wordren was lying on his side, his scales looked paler than usual, as the fireproof element slowly vanished from them. Before he spotted the wounds on the older dragon's body, Lohengrin could've sworn Wordy looks like he's asleep.

A few steps away from him, were strange marks on the ground, and more importantly, feint traces of his daughter's scent. Sniffing the ground, Lohengrin followed the trail with his head dropped, and tried to solve the puzzle here. Judging from the trail's size, shape and scent, it seemed that Larany's was here. She was forced to stay somehow. Then she was moved somehow, not by her legs. And she was carried away.

Reaching out with his mind, farther than any time before, Lohengrin mentally flew through the whole territory of Clan Toemnir, but he could only find a vague echo of his daughter's presence. She was alive, but far away.

He took a sharp breath as he opened his eyes. Stretching this far for this long made his head hurt. He had only a few moments to collect himself, when Garenald and Selara appeared, and landed beside him.

"\_I've counted everyone here.\_" Selara reported with a heavy voice  
\_"We are still missing four Night Furies. Two Guards, a huntress

and- "\_

"\_A youngling.\_ Lohengrin whispered.

"\_Yes.\_ Selara nodded.

"\_I flew to the spot you've mentioned"\_ Garenald continued \_"I've found the... remains of Eienarth No traces of Volkownyr, though.\_"

"\_So that makes five.\_ Lohengrin assessed.

"\_Yeah. Lohen... Just what in the name of the Spirits is going on here?"\_ the male Guard asked \_"Did they came here to kill us or to abduct us?"\_

"\_I don't know, Garen.\_ Lohengrin growled.

"\_Yet.\_

\* \* \*

><p><strong>AN So here we are, another chapter done. And where's poor Nyssie now? In Chapter 4! ; )<br><strong>

\*\*As always, ask, comment, review. Every bits of feedback is appreciated, and I answer every questions.

><strong>

\*\*Till next time!\*\*

\*\*I\*\*

\*\*I\*\*

\*\*I\*\*

\*\*V\*\*

## 15. Scattered by the Storm - Chapter 4

Chapter 4.

The world was waxed into a jumbled mess, with sounds so muffled it was as if they came from underwater, sights looking overly blurry and surreal, and scents so alien and incomprehensible, nothing made sense anymore. She couldn't even determine is she was laying on her belly or her back, is she curled or stretched all over... Her foggy mind barely registered that maybe she's being moved, but to where and why, she had no clue. She had no idea what happened to her, or what is going to happen. She wasn't even sure if she's alive at all. Even opening and closing her eyes were difficult for her, let alone trying to figure out a situation nobody he knew was ever into.

Sometimes, she managed to observe a few things. The voices she heard were unlike any dragon's, and they spoke in a way she couldn't understand. The lighting rarely changed: sometimes it was lighter, others it was darker. Once, she was almost sure she felt a breeze of

wind against her scales, but she couldn't even think about opening her wings, let alone trying it.

Time lost all of its meaning as she just flowed with the events, like a pebble being dragged along in a flooding river's violent currents. Then slowly but steadily, her mind descended into the comforting darkness again.

Much later when she woke up, she felt a bit more collected. She hesitantly opened her eyes to see... absolutely nothing. A terrified groan escaped her mouth as she shook her head left and right but the darkness showed no sign of going away. A hoarse male voice called her on the name:

"\_Laranys? Is that you?"\_

The voice seemed oddly familiar, and after a few moments of thinking, she managed to associate a face to it. They've met quite a few times before, they even used to play together years ago, they weren't too far from each other in age.

"\_Volkownyr?"\_ she tried.

After a rustle of something being dragged on the floor accompanied by soft clicks of metal pieces, the voice sounded a lot closer.

"\_It's me."\_ Volkownyr said \_"You've got something on your head, hold still and I'll try to get it off."\_

Laranys ceased her stirring, and she felt a mouth carefully clamping down at her nose, and it began to slowly pull the fabric off her head. Seconds later, she saw Volkownyr in front of her, with a brown bag hanging from his mouth.

"\_By the grace of the Spirits!"\_ she cried out \_"What happened to you, Volk?"\_

The young male's face was full of deep gashes; some still had droplets of blood around it. When he slightly opened his mouth to let the bag fall, she saw more scars on his chest, and as her gaze trailed down towards the bag, she was appalled by the sight of his right leg. He was missing two claws from his paw, along with a small chunk of it. He looked like he was caught inside a whirlwind of sharp stones, and the sight of his ragged wings only added to Laranys' suspicions.

"\_These damned humans blew a hilltop on me."\_ Volkownyr groaned  
\_"I've got lucky; Arthie got the worst of it. Be glad you didn't have to see what's left of him."\_

Laranys couldn't decide which one horrified her more: Eienarth's gruesome fate, or the nonchalant way how Volkownyr presented it. Was this the dragon whom she used to catch fish together with in the shallows of the river?

Her silence was quickly interrupted however.

"\_But if you are here"\_ Volk began \_"That means-"\_

"\_They attacked the valley!"\_ Laranys cried out. Her mind became

overwhelmed with the sudden onslaught of returning memories. Her breathing tensed, heart began to hammer inside her chest as she relived what happened to her a short while ago.

"Nyssie!" Volkownyr stepped closer, with a concerned look in his eyes "Nyssie, look at me!"

The dragoness slowly looked at him, her narrow pupils and intense breathing obviously indicating her shock. The sight immediately stirred up pity inside of Volk.

"Nyssie." He said softly in the most comforting tone he was able to muster "Please, try to calm down, and tell me what happened."

"I... They..." she swallowed and continued in a shaky tone "I was at the riverbank when... when something huge flew above us, and... and it spat out a green fog... it made us fireless. Everything was in chaos... I tried to hide behind a boulder, and heard roars and explosions coming from the entrance of the valley... eventually the humans came, and... and... they threw their iron vine-things on me and dragged me into a cage of some sort... then Grandpa came and tried to get me out... and... and..."

Laranys began to shudder and her eyes became watery. Volkownyr took another step towards her, but was powerless stop her from bursting into tears.

"They shot him..." she sobbed "... many times! They..."

Volk closed his eyes, and stepped beside her, throwing his wing around her shaking and crying form. Larany's collapsed to the floor, burying her face into her paws. Volkownyr felt his throat becoming tight, as he settled down next to the wailing dragoness. He had no idea what to say, so he stayed silent, and rested his head on her neck. It took a good amount of time for Larany's to calm herself down again. Then, an even more depressing thought crossed her mind:

"Volk... if they attacked the valley... what if they..."

"No." Volkownyr said strictly. "I refuse to even consider that. With Furies like Naveron, Salkonyr, or your father for example, I am sure they figured something out to evade the attack."

He received no answer, so he continued:

"If you think it over, there's no way Leader Lohengrin would've let the whole clan perish by the claws of these bastards. I think if he assumed that it's a fight they cannot win, Leader Lohengrin would've ordered the others to pull back or even leave the valley." he explained.

Laranys didn't reply, instead, she began to eye her surroundings. They were inside a large cage, and the cage seemed to be in some sort of cave, but the walls seemed too smooth and their surface didn't look anything like stone. She soon discovered that there were a few, perfectly circle-shaped holes on the wall, which were opened to the... sky?

"\_Where in the name of Wotahn are we?"\_ she asked in dismay.

"\_I was more or less conscious when they dragged us here"\_ Volkownyr began "\_It appears we are inside of one of those huge flying things the humans use. Judging how the tremors began and went away, and from what I saw through those holes, I'd say we're airborne."\_

"\_But... how come there's no wind blowing through those holes?"\_

Volkownyr followed her gaze and looked at one of the mentioned holes.

"\_Maybe they're covered in some kind of transparent material. I really don't know."\_

After a few moments of thinking, Laranys spoke up again.

"\_But if we're in the air... then they are moving us. But where? And why?"\_

"\_I have no clue... but I think we will find out soon."\_ Volkownyr sighed.

\* \* \*

><p>The two Night Furies were wakened up from their uneasy slumber by loud noises and tremors. Volkownyr tried to peek out at one of the windows to see what's going on around them.</p>

"\_It seems like we landed..."\_ he stated \_"I can't see much... But I think we're on a huge plain of some sort, and I can see the mountains far away-\_

A door snapped open on the other side of the plane's cargo hold, and a human came in carrying two buckets, escorted by an armed one. The armed human pointed his gun at the two Furies. Volkownyr growled and bared teeth at him, but slowly retreated to the back of the cage, keeping himself between the humans and Laranys. In the meantime, the other human spilled a bucket of fish on the floor of the cage, and put the other bucket next to it, which was full of water. After they were done, they growled something to each other and left.

"\_They brought us food."\_ Laranys commented sarcastically \_"How nice."\_

"\_Absolutely."\_ Volk replied in the same manner \_"You remember when you said they used a kind of gas to keep us from breathing fire?"\_

"\_Yeah...\_"

"\_Have you tried your fire ever since?"\_

The question brought a stunning realization on Laranys. How come she never even thought of this? But her eagerness was quickly washed away by the disgusting goo she managed to cough up instead of the usual flammable gas.

"\_Just as I thought."\_ Volk assessed, seeing the younger dragoness'

tries \_ "I'm willing to bet my wings that the fish is full of the same thing their gas contains to keep us nice and tame." \_

Laranys carefully sniffed a fish, and hesitantly bit off a tiny part of it. After some chewing and thorough savoring, she concluded:

"\_It does have a slight aftertaste. And not because it's stale." \_

Volkownyr sat back on his haunches, eyeing the fish and thinking. A few silent moments passed, then he slowly spoke up:

"\_I'm thinking about whether we should eat or not." \_

"\_Well..." \_ Nyssie frowned \_ "I can go without eating for a couple of days." \_

"\_Me too, that's not the problem." \_ he thought out loud \_ "Thing is, now we are fed, so we can move and think relatively clearly. Other than being blocked from our fire, we are not hampered in any way. But I don't know how far will they transport us..." \_

"\_And after a long period of starvation" \_ Larany's caught up with her companion's chain of thought \_ "we wouldn't be able to plan our escape, or would be too weak to try it." \_

"\_Exactly." \_ Volkownyr nodded. \_ "Currently I can't see even a remote chance of getting out of here relatively soon; the cage is too strong for our claws and teeth, I even tried to push the grids apart but I couldn't. I think we should try to play along for a while, and keep an eye out for any opportunity." \_

Laranys let out a sad sigh.

"\_You have a point." \_ she admitted. \_ "But it's not like we aren't going to starve anyway." \_

Both of them took a look at the half dozen fish laying on the floor, and the lone bucket which was only halfway to full. This would've been a decent meal for a hatchling, or an acceptable appetizer for a fully grown Night Fury. They were in-between, but definitely far from being hatchlings.

"\_Still better than nothing." \_ Volk sighed too.

"\_Right. Lets eat before they change their minds and come back to take it away." \_

They quietly ate their deplorable amount of food, and after drinking out the bucket, they settled down next to each other at the other side of the cage.

"\_This waiting makes me crazy." \_ Larany's fumed after a while.

"\_Me too. But we have to stay sharp and be ready for anything." \_ Volkownyr replied.

"\_Volk?" \_

"\_Hm?" \_

"\_What do you think"\_ Laranys began, and swallowed tensely before going on \_"were other Furies from the clan captured with us?"\_

"\_I don't know it for sure. I didn't see anyone else, but that doesn't mean anything. What I did see however, were more flying things like this one. It is possible that others are carried separately from us."\_

She looked around again, and spoke up:

"\_There is still a lot of room for others... I just can't wrap my head around this whole thing. They start to shoot up our home, killing a lot of us. In the meantime, they even capture a few of us but they don't kill us, instead they start to take us to who-knows-where. This doesn't make any sense. What can they do with caged dragons? Will they just kill us slowly, or-"\_

"\_During training"\_ Volk interrupted her \_"I've learned about what to do when you're caught in a sudden storm and have no shelter. My instructor said that just fly with the wind. If you fight it and try to go as you want, it'll slam you to the ground and break your bones into pieces. Let the wind take you wherever it wants, then you can figure out how to get home."\_

"\_So you think we should do what we would do in a storm?"\_

"\_Yeah. I don't want to go into wild speculations without anything to back it up... so I'm going to wait and see."\_

"\_Makes sense."\_ Laranys commented.

"\_Heh, good old Wordy usually made sense..." he smiled, then realized what he just said and quickly began to apologize \_"By the Spirits I shouldn't... I'm so sorry Nyssie, I'm a complete idiot!"\_

"\_It's alright."\_ she said quietly.

Volkownyr took a rueful look at her.

"\_I didn't mean to remind you of him..."\_

"\_I do want to remember him."\_ Laranys explained sadly \_"I just want to remember about the good things."\_

Volk opened his mouth to answer, when the main doors of the cargo hold opened with a loud rumble, allowing some fresh air and sunlight in. And a swarm of roars and cries. The Night Furies stood up and ran to the other end of their cage for a better view. They saw lots of humans, pushing and pulling another cage, which had a dragon inside. That dragon was enormous compared to them, and by the way he was covered with a strange web of some sort, the two Furies assumed he was caught in mid-air.

One of the humans shouted something, then two other humans drew weapons, and shot something red into the straining and roaring dragon. Within a few moments, the dragon went silent and motionless.

"\_How in the name of-\_

"\_Tranquilizer.\_" Larany whisper.

But the two armed humans didn't stop there, they ran up the loading ramp and reloaded their guns.

"\_Stay behind me!"\_ Volkownyr cried and began to shepherd the younger dragoness towards a corner, while facing the humans, growling and hissing at them and spreading his wings. Larany wasn't too scared about the incoming sleep again, but she was horrified how many bloody holes were torn in Volk's wings. She wasn't sure if he'd ever be able to fly again.

She was about to voice her concern towards him, when the darts came, knocking them out in a matter of seconds.

\* \* \*

><p>As the world slowly began to assemble from the fragments, Larany couldn't help but let out a pained groan. Intensifying pain raked into her mind, the sudden dose of sedative caused a sharp headache during the wearing-off period. She slowly lifted her head and shook it in an effort to clear it. The first thing she noticed is the blunt humming coming from the sides, meaning that they were in the air again. She rubbed her forehead with the back of her paw, which seemed to lessen the pain a bit. Her peaceful contemplation was disturbed by a deep growl coming from startlingly close. She swung around, and the sight stunned her.</p>

In the other corner of their cage, there was an enormous dragon, from a kin she'd never seen before. It was covered in reddish-brown scales which were darker on its back and got whiter around its belly. Curiosity overcoming her fear, Larany carefully stepped closer to examine it. Its strange scent indicated that he's a male, and he lived in forests and places which were completely unknown for her. Larany was mesmerized to see the creature had two full sets of wings. Night Furies had a set of primary wings and two sets of tailfins at the base and tip of their tail for additional control and manoeuvrability during flight. This dragon here had large and seemingly powerful wings at his shoulders, and another, slightly smaller pair a bit below, towards his hips. She couldn't get a clear picture about his exact dimensions because he was still covered with the strange, brown, human-made web, which tied his wings to his body in a surely unnatural and painful position. But even then she was sure that this dragon is at least three times bigger than her father, who was the largest Night Fury she knew. He had a round head with two horns and a grumpy expression which made him look like... an owl.

During her sniffing and looking, Larany accidentally poked the dragon's upper left wing with her nose. The effect was immediate: the half-asleep dragon roared out, making her scream and as she tumbled back and fell through Volkownyr who was lying behind her. The sudden uproar woke him up too, he rocketed to his feet but when he saw what's at the other side of their cage, he instinctively jumped back too, accidentally knocking his head into the metal grids and falling on Larany with a pained yowl.

"\_Argh... Volk!"\_ Lyara moaned under him.

"\_I'm sorry!"\_ Volkownyr barked and quickly got off from the smaller dragoness, and faced the dragon, who bared his teeth and growled menacingly at them. Volk roared at him, and the dragon seemed a bit surprised at first, responded with a much deeper and threatening roar.

"\_Volk, wait!"\_ Larany's cried, after getting up again.

"\_If it is a fight he wants!"\_

"\_No! Look at him, he's shocked by the pain!"\_

Narrowing his eyes, Volkownyr took a good look at the other dragon's features. Now, he noticed that the dragon's pupils were narrow slits, and his chest rose and fell rapidly by the hasty breathing.

"\_Let me try to help him!"\_ Larany's said.

Volk took a scared look at her.

"\_Are you nuts!? He looks half-crazy; he can tear you apart in seconds if he wants to!"\_

Larany's pushed him out of her way with an angry grunt, and walked up to the dragon. She stared deeply into his eyes, and slowly, distinctly spoke up:

"\_Listen. You are hurt. If I can take a look at you, I might be able to help. Will you allow me?"\_

The dragon slowly, hesitantly blinked in acknowledgement.

Larany's stood up to her hind legs, and placing her forepaws on the side of the dragon, she looked over his wing, searching for any kind of obvious injury. She quickly found out what was wrong: the web the humans used to catch him bended his wing backwards too much, and dislocated the large bone from the shoulder-joint.

"\_He has a sprained wing."\_ Nyssie diagnosed. \_"Volk?"\_

"\_Yeah?"\_ came the not too keen reply.

"\_I need your help to remove this thing from him before I attempt to put his wing back in its place."\_

"\_Okay."\_ Volkownyr sighed.

Overcoming his uneasiness, Volkownyr approached the dragon, and stood up beside Larany's. Together, they began to carefully cut through the net with their claws, and removing the pieces to allow free access to the injured area. After a few minutes of work, the dragon was free of the ropes.

"\_I think I can help him..."\_ Larany's said \_"But it's going to hurt."\_

"\_How about we make him bite into something?"\_ Volk asked.

"\_Good idea."\_ Nyssie nodded, and walked to the other side of the

cage, where the empty water bucket were. She picked it up with her mouth, and carried it over the injured dragon.

"\_I'll try to put your wing back to its place. It is going to hurt, so I'd like to ask you to bite on this. It'll help to stand the pain."\_ she explained to him.

The dragon looked nervous, but he hesitantly nodded, and opened his jaws wide. Laranys carefully placed the bucket into the mouth, and the dragon firmly bit down on it.

"\_Okay, now give me some room."\_ Laranys told to Volk, who took a few steps back and watched her as she climbed up on the dragon's back.

"\_Are you ready?"\_ She asked from the injured dragon, which gave an agreeing grunt.

"\_Volk, please grab onto his leg and try to hold it in place."\_

Now Volkownyr clearly looked like he's having reservations, but he did as she asked. Laranys readied herself, and pulled her fangs back as she bit down on the dislocated bone. She waited a few seconds, then forcefully pulled the bone upwards, then let it go as the joint pulled back into its place.

The dragon's roar was muffled by the bucket, but he bit down so hard, he crushed it with his jaws. He instinctively shook himself and kicked wildly, sending both Night Furies to the other end of the cage. Laranys groaned at the painful impact, but at least this time Volk didn't fall on her. She must have knocked her head, as the world seemed to spin around, forcing her to shut her eyes and tighten her jaws to keep the earlier, scarce meal inside.

She felt a brush of air on her face, and she opened her eyes instantly, to see the huge face of the dragon only inches from hers.

"\_Are you alright?"\_ he asked in a deep surprisingly and caring tone.

"\_I think so. Volk?"\_

"\_I'm fine."\_ came the groan beside her. \_"More or less."\_

"\_Please forgive me; I couldn't really think straight."\_ the dragon said in an apologetic manner. \_"I owe both of you a great deal of gratitude. You've spared me from a lot of pain, I feel indescribably better now."\_

"\_Glad to hear it."\_ Nyssie smiled at him as she stood up \_"My name is Laranys. My friends call me Nyssie."\_

"\_I wish we could've met in more pleasant circumstances, but nevertheless, I'm glad to meet you Laranys."\_ the dragon smiled at her \_"I am T'Arakhniz, but you can call me Rak. And who is your friend?"\_

Volk stood up too, raising his wings slightly, sticking his chest out to try to look more majestic. Considering the fact that Rak was three

times taller than him as he sat, his efforts were not too impressive.

"\_I am Volkownyr, son of Zaathanyr, Guard at the Auxiliary Night Guard Wing of Clan Toemnir.\_" he announced, earning a disapproving glare from Nyssie, and a light chuckle from Rak.

"\_I see that some things never change.\_" he grinned \_"Your kind was always famous for its wayward insistence for noble titles. But you're also renowned for your wits and compassionate nature, and I'm happy to say that you two won't bring shame to your kind's reputation anytime soon.\_"

It took Volk some time to find out that this was a compliment, so he just sat down, and stayed silent. Then Rak turned back to Nyssie.

"\_Can I ask what kind of dragon are you?"\_ she asked.

"\_You've never seen a Stormcutter before?"\_ Rak asked back and when he saw Nyssie shaking her head, he went on: \_"I'm not that surprised; your kind has lived estranged from other dragons for a long-long time. But now I'd like to ask: what do you know about this place and the humans?"\_

Volk and Nyssie exchanged a meaningful glare, then Nyssie spoke up:

"\_Well, we are almost as unsure as you, but I can safely say that we're all in big trouble now.\_"

\* \* \*

><p><strong>AN: Okay, the mystery around Cloudjumper is solved: he's a Stormcutter!

><strong>

\*\*Good to know. ^\*\*

\*\*Review! Please? :3\*\*

\*\*I\*\*

\*\*I\*\*

\*\*I\*\*

\*\*V\*\*

## 16. Scattered by the Storm - Chapter 5

### Chapter 5.

The dirt road which ran through the pine forest hadn't been used for centuries. A long time ago, it was the only connection to the rest of the world for a little outlying village. But the village had been blown away by the storms of history, and the rubble was overgrown by the vegetation long ago, eradicating the remains of any human presence around the area.

Now, the road was experiencing its heaviest traffic, ever.

A tank rolled at the front and ploughed a path through the fresh snow, followed by a handful of APCs\* and a convoy of cargo trucks. A line of infantrymen half-heartedly trampled the snow on each side of the convoy. Around the middle, there was a tanker, and the end of the convoy was secured by an anti-air tank, its spotlight tirelessly scanning the night sky.

A lone soldier stepped out of the line with a cigarette hanging from his mouth. He took out an old lighter from one of his pockets, and tried to light the cigarette.

\*Click!\* Nothing but sparkles. \*Click!\* Again. After the third time, the soldier cursed angrily:

"Ð'ÐµÑ•Ð¿Ð¾Ð»ÐµÐ·Ð½Ð¾ Ð'ÐµÑ€ÑED½Ð¾!" And tried again. \*Click!\* This time the lighter actually lit up.

"Ð•Ð°Ð°Ð¾Ð½ÐµÑ†!" He put the lighter to the end of his smoke to light it.

And in the same moment, the tanker beside him, exploded, the blast throwing him into a snow drift.

Chaos erupted between the soldiers, as every flashlight tried to search the air. The AA tank rolled forward, and shot a burst towards the dark sky. Then it too disappeared in a blue-purple explosion.

The man who's biggest problem was to how to light his cigarette was lying motionless on the ground. Blasts and detonations raged around him, with occasional sounds of gunfire, shouting and screaming. After just a few minutes which seemed more like hours, the world became silent; the only thing that could be heard was the crackling fire. He slowly lifted his dizzy head up.

The convoy was gone, only the burning wreckage of the vehicles remained. Dozens of dead lay across the road, at the spots where the explosions and fireballs had thrown them. Terrified cries could be heard coming from the forest, where people fled for their lives. The man's jaw slowly opened, and the snowy cigarette fell out to the road, which was soaking with mud and blood. A quiet, horrifying growl came from behind him, and as he turned towards the source, he stared into the eyes of death itself.

An enormous, black creature with ten centimetres long claws, forelegs smeared with blood, and a gaze of ice-cold blue, promising to seal his fate.

The soldier opened his mouth, but the creature rapidly moved forward, bringing his scream of terror to an abrupt end.

\* \* \*

><p>The rising sun slowly crept over the horizon, its first rays greeting seven Night Furies as they hurried towards home. Maintaining a wide V-formation, the group was led by Lohengrin, then followed by a mixed assignment of Guards and other Night Furies who the clan

could spare.<p>

"\_It was surprisingly easy, wasn't it?"\_ a young Night Fury thought out loud, and flew a little closer to his friend on the left. \_"I mean, it makes me wonder what could've happened at home if we could've used our fire..."\_

"\_There is no point wondering about that, Ren."\_ Lenhardt growled. \_"They gave us a nasty surprise then, we gave them one now. I just wish I could've taken out more."\_

Wyren gulped, and asked in a low voice:

"\_Still no news about your sister?"\_

"\_Nothing at all."\_ Lenny let out an angered huff \_"I swear if they hurt her, I..."\_

"\_I'm sure she's alright-\_ Ren tried, but seeing his friend's disbelieving glare, he remained silent.

"\_I don't think I have ever been this angry..."\_ Lenny admitted a few moments later \_"I don't understand why Dad didn't let us catch the survivors-\_

"\_Because this wasn't about revenge, young lad."\_ an old Guard overheard their conversation and decided to add his own comment. Lenhardt quickly recognized the voice; it belonged to Arnavyr, the newly appointed Second Guard. He was the second in command of yesterday night's attack.

"\_The only reason we flew out to dispatch them was because they were coming too close to our current hiding place. Acting upon anger and lust for revenge would force us toward rash decisions, which we would surely regret later.\_"

"\_But... if this whole thing was to keep our new home a secret, why did we let some of them slip away?"\_

Arnavyr opened his mouth to answer, when another voice joined to the talk.

"\_A good question, and allow me to answer that.\_"

The three dragons turned their head to see Lohengrin flying a bit above and behind them.

"\_Arnie, please take the lead.\_"

"\_Aye.\_" the old dragon nodded, and with a few strong flaps of wings, he flew forward to lead the formation. Lohengrin occupied Arnavyr's place, and looked at the two youngsters. Wyren seemed quite nervy for the opportunity to speak with the Leader himself, Lenhardt just looked curious.

"\_Okay, so let's figure out, why did I let those humans get away?"\_ Lohen spoke up in a chatting tone, taking an inquisitive look at them. Wyren looked like he just bit down on his own tongue, but Lenny spoke up after a few moments of thinking:

"\_Maybe... you want them to bring word about our attack?"\_

"\_You're on the right track, keep going!"\_ Lohengrin nodded with a faint smile.

"\_They've lost a good amount of people and contraptions. A few of the scattered survivors will make it back to wherever they came from, and tell the story of our attack to the others. Then... maybe they'll send out more people to investigate?"\_

"\_Possibly, yes. I want them to focus their efforts on this area, while we relocate to somewhere else."\_ Lohengrin explained.

"\_We're going to move again?"\_ Wyren cried out in surprise.

"\_I'll announce the whole thing to the clan this evening. The Shalnar ridges aren't suitable for a permanent replacement of Toemnir valley; it lacks both the necessary space and food for that."\_

"\_But where else could we go? Further to the north?"\_ Lenny asked.

"\_No, that would be too obvious, and human presence is also more significant there. I'll explain everything this evening to the whole clan, and answer everyone's questions then."\_

\* \* \*

><p>She tried so hard, but even her friend's constant encouraging and comments about her good progress couldn't change the fact that her aim was still helplessly off.</p>

"\_It's not working, Melyan."\_ she sighed in a depressed way as she sat down on her haunches. \_"No matter how hard I try, no matter how much I practice, it's either too short, too long or completely misses."\_

"\_Don't give me that, Ohrana."\_ Melyan said soothingly as she sat down beside her. \_"You've told me you'll never fly again, and you're pretty decent at that now.\_

Ohrana took a rueful look at her. One of her eyes was bright yellow, as the summer sun at its peak. The other one was an unhealthy shade of grey and white, blocked forever with the fog of blindness. As Elder Tamaana described to her, one has two eyes for three-dimensional sight, which is essential for distance measurement. And knowing the distances of the objects around her is an absolute necessity for a stable and safe flight, and good fireball aim.

Since flying and breathing fire were the most important aspects of any dragon's life, everyone had pity on Ohrana, and tried to help her however they could. But because she was famed for her sharp eyes and quick flight which made her a great huntress and tutor of many, Ohrana felt worse than ever for her constant reliance on others' help to even stay alive. After she went through the initial stages of shock and depression, her friends, especially Melyan managed to convince her to keep herself together. During the days of practice flights, she learned to compare everything to her own wingspan, and it proved to be an adequate way to determine how far everything is. She was still a bit uncertain at diving and low-level flight, but at

least opening her wings didn't come with a promise of a lethal disaster anymore.

But shooting fire was an other, even tougher issue. Right now they were sitting at a meadow, with a larger boulder in the middle. She used that for target practice, shooting weak fireballs which would not blow everything into pieces. This way she also conserved gas, which allowed her more shots before she'd run out. Melyan carved an X into the middle of the boulder, and demonstrated the task by sending a fireball right to it from like a hundred steps. But the best Ohrana managed, was to graze the side of the boulder only once, the rest of her shots landed everywhere else. A growing number of black spots on the grassy field indicated her efforts, but the lack of success began to dishearten her.

"\_I've had enough of misfires for today."\_ she sighed \_"Lets walk home."\_

"\_Walk?"\_ Melyan asked as she stood up.

"\_Yeah. I've had enough being afraid of slamming myself into the ground, too."\_ Ohrana replied sourly.

"\_I wish there was a larger river or a lake around here so we could practice flying above the water instead."\_ Melyan said as they began to walk back to the others \_"It would be a lot safer."\_

"\_I'd rather talk about something else."\_ Ohrana mumbled \_"How are you doing? Is the family alright?"\_

Melyan froze mid-step and dropped her head, making Ohrana regret her unwary question immediately.

"\_Mostly."\_ she whispered.

"\_Please forgive me."\_ Ohrana said regretfully \_"I just can't believe... oh never mind."\_

"\_I still can't believe it, either."\_ Melyan whispered bitterly \_"I haven't slept alone since like sixty winters. It takes some time to get used to. I still dream about him almost every night. And sometimes, occasionally I still find myself expecting him to come home any minute."\_

"\_Now that I think about it, I'm actually lot luckier than you... I can't imagine what you're going through. But I still can't wrap my head around what happened or why did it happen. It just... came like lightning from the clear sky!"\_

"\_I don't have answers, Ohrana."\_ Melyan murmured as both of them began to walk again \_"I doubt that even Lohengrin has."\_

"\_I'm pretty sure he will figure out something."\_ Ohrana stated \_"He's always looking for the correlations behind things. Even when he was a youngling, I had to thoroughly explain him why I want him to do what I ask. But as soon as he saw the reasons, he understood.\_"

"\_I would be more curious about what comes next."\_ Melyan wondered \_"It is obvious that we cannot stay here for too long, but nobody's

really knowledgeable about the rest of the continent. Where will he lead us and how, I have no clue." \_

"\_Actually, I'm surprised he hadn't decided to go after Larany's yet. It must be a horror for a father to see his daughter disappear. I would surely go crazy if something like that would happen to me." \_

"\_Sometimes, I wonder how can he hold out like that, the pressure has to be enormous." \_Melyan said "\_I wouldn't want to be in his position either." \_

They both stopped and looked up to the sky as they heard a voice calling for them.

"\_Mom! Ohrana!" \_

After the sound of a few flaps of wings, Lyara appeared above, and touched down beside them.

"\_Lohengrin asked me and Lenny to help him gather everyone together." \_ she explained "\_He wants to make a conclave; he says he has a lot to say for everyone." \_

The two older dragonesses exchanged a glare.

"\_Looks like we're getting some answers, then?" \_Ohrana asked.

"\_We are. And I'm curious too; he refused to tell me what's on his mind. He's planning something big, that's for sure." \_ Lyara replied.

"\_Then let's not waste any more time here." \_ Ohrana said and took off. After a few moments, both Lyara and Melyan leapt to the sky as well, to follow her.

\* \* \*

><p>Fifty-one Night Furies were sitting at a clearing in front of Lohengrin's cave. They quietly whispered to each other while they were waiting for their Leader to appear. Their patience was not tested this time; Lohengrin came out of his cave after just a few moments, and sat down near the entrance. Everyone became silent as they looked up to him, and Lohengrin scratched his throat and began his speech which he spent quite some time polishing in the last few hours:<p>

"\_Bound brothers and sisters of Clan Toemnir, my friends, my family. The last few days have been especially hard to endure for all of us; we have all lost someone or something which was mightily important for us. The last days put our skills, our bravery, our determination and our ability to adapt to the ultimate test. And despite these conditions, against all chances, we came through. We took a heavy blow, but we stood up and fought back. We have shown the enemy that if they want our lives, they should prepare to pay a high price for it." \_

"\_We have lost many great Furies, but their sacrifice was not in vain. They gave their lives so we can survive, and I won't waste the chance they gave us. To ensure our survival, the safety and security

of the upcoming generations, I decided to find a new home for all of us; a place where we don't have to fear for our lives, where we can live and raise our young safely."\_\_

Surprised murmurs erupted from the crowd, but they quickly quieted down as they saw that Lohengrin was about to continue.

"\_In two days, a special assortment of Guards and Hunters will depart to the west to secure resting places for the rest of the Clan which will follow them later. I had to thoroughly search the old scribes of knowledge which the ancient Elders left here for us, but I have found a suitable place for all of us to live. It is called the Field of Thousand Diamonds, Zer Dyemant Vidaece in the Old Tongue. It is a huge plain dotted by hundreds of lakes, and there is a long mountain range a couple days of flight from there, called the Menaedhral. That is where we will make our new home. It is about twenty days from here, if we travel from dusk till dawn. According to the descriptions of the ancient Elders, I planned out a route there, which should be fast and safe enough."\_\_

"\_I know that this sounds quite an endeavour for all of us, but if our ancestors were capable for that, then we are too. I am confident in each and every one of your abilities, and I'm sure that a trip this long will cause little to no problems for us. I'm always keeping the well-being of all of you above anything else, and I would not even risk this if I knew that the result was not worth the effort."\_\_

Lohengrin paused to take a good look at the crowd. After the first shock, most of the dragons seemed to like his idea, and hopefully he can convince the ones with doubts later on.

"\_Thank you for your patience. I'll make all the necessary arrangements tomorrow, may the\_ \_Spirits of the Ancestors watch over for you tonight. If anyone has any questions or reservations, I'm available tomorrow."\_\_

The crowd of Furies began to slowly dissolve, with everyone chatting and discussing the new turn of events. Lohengrin noticed his sun rushing towards him, and he went forward to bump heads with him.

"\_This sounds pretty adventurous, Dad!"\_\_ Lenny exclaimed \_\_"I can't wait to go and see what the world looks like!"\_\_

"\_Well, we'll have a lot of work to do, but I agree that it's going to be interesting."\_\_ Lohengrin smiled at him.

They noticed Lyara heading towards them as well, so they sat down to wait for her. Lohengrin's smile slowly faded as he noticed the troubled glare of his mate.

"\_Hi, Mom!"\_\_ Lenny greeted her merrily.

"\_Hi, my dear. Would you please go ahead of us and light the fire in the cave? We'll follow shortly; I'd just like to have a few words with your father."\_\_

"\_Alright, see you inside. I'll get a few fish too, so we can have a dinner together."\_\_ Lenny said after he got a grateful lick from his

mother, he went inside their cave. In the meantime, Lohengrin decided to go ahead of the problem.

"\_I know a place not far from here where we can speak privately."\_ he told Lyara, and upon getting an agreeing nod from her, both of them took off and flew above the forest. They landed at a small meadow, and Lohengrin turned to face his mate.

"\_I'm all ears."\_ he sighed.

"\_You know what's bugging me about this plan of yours."\_ Lyara said quietly.

"\_I know. What do you want me to do, Lya?"\_

"\_Anything! I told you that I want to-\_

"\_We've been through this before. You're not going anywhere alone."\_ Lohengrin said unusually strictly to her. Lyara's ears perked up, and her tail flicked a few times, showing her anger.

"\_So are we just going to leave her where she is? Lohengrin, this is our daughter we're talking about! I don't want to go anywhere without her, and you said you're sure that she's still alive! You haven't even shown a vague sign to look for her so far, and-\_

"\_You think I don't know this?!" \_Lohengrin cried out \_"You want me to make a choice of who to abandon: my family and clan, or my daughter! I'm trying to come up with a solution but I can't! Don't force me to make a choice I cannot-\_

"\_Stop roaring at me!"\_

Lohengrin bit down on his tongue and tore his gaze away from his tearing mate. He forcefully controlled his breath to stop his heart hammering inside his chest. When he spoke up again, his voice was soft and apologetic:

"\_I'm so sorry."\_ he whispered, staring at the ground \_"I'm a bit tenser lately, almost more so than I can handle."\_

Lyara stepped forward to snuggle against her mate, pressing her chest against his, nuzzling his neck.

"\_We mustn't fight, Lohen."\_ she whispered. \_"I know you're trying as hard as you can to keep things from falling apart."\_

"\_And often I still feel like I'm powerless to stop it from happening."\_ Lohengrin admitted shakily \_"Everyone's expecting me to put things back to the way they used to be. But I'm no miracle-worker. I cannot resurrect the dead and I can't rebuild our home from the ashes...\_"

Lyara snuggled even tighter against him, and Lohengrin felt a wave of gratitude for her support.

"\_A long time ago, you said you aren't the one to let down anyone. I know you're planning something, but you don't want to tell it to me."\_ she took half a step back to lick his face. \_"Don't shut me out."\_ she said softly.

Lohengrin took a deep breath before staring into Lyara's eyes.

"\_I'm... preparing Lenhardt as much as I can, so when I'll leave to search for Larany, he can take my place and lead the clan to Menaedhral.\_" he blurted out.

He tensely looked for his mate's reactions. Lyara's jaw slightly dropped like if she's trying to say something, ears flattening on her head. But she closed her mouth after it and remained silent. Her eyes told Lohengrin all he needed. Comparing to the reaction he'd expected, this was actually not a negative one.

"\_You don't look too happy.\_" he tried cautiously.

"\_Should I?"\_ Lyara asked back sadly "\_I don't want you to go for the same reason you don't want me to. But... If anyone can bring Nyssie home, it's you. I'm more concerned about... Lohen, he's just fifteen winters old.\_"

"\_I know.\_" Lohengrin admitted "\_And he's my only heir. I had a hard time coming to this, believe me. But he will have you to help him, as well as all the Elders. Together, you can overcome any difficulty, and I only plan to leave after we're halfway there. I wouldn't even try this if I wasn't sure that he's able to handle this. Lenny's a clever boy, he'll manage.\_"

After a few moments of silence, Lyara slowly nodded.

"\_You have a point.\_" she said. Lohengrin swallowed tensely, and dropped his head again.

"\_I still hate myself for doing this..."\_ he mumbled "\_It's like there's a curse on me or I don't know... this is not the way I imagined our life. Nothing around me stays ordinary. Trouble seems to stick on me like bees on a flower. You'd deserve someone-\_"

"\_I have no regrets, Lohen.\_" Lyara stated, staring into his eyes "\_If I'd have known what lies ahead of us back then, it wouldn't have made me change my mind.\_"

A broad, genuine smile appeared on Lohengrin's face, which was something that hadn't happen for a long time.

"\_I don't know where would I be without you..."\_ he whispered, and threw his wings around his mate, pulling her into a tight hug.

"\_You'll never have to know.\_" Lyara whispered as she nuzzled Lohengrin's face.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>AN Here's a bit of an explanation:\*\*

\*\*APC - Armoured Personnel Carrier\*\*

\*\*And for those who can't speak Russian (like me) or can't read Cyrillic letters (like me)\*\*

\*\* "Д'ДуÑ•ДъД¾Д»ДуД·Д½Д¾ Д'ДуÑ€ÑCED¾Д¾!" - "Useless  
cr\*p!"\*\*

\*\* "Д•Д°Д°Д¾Д½ДуÑ†!" - "Finally!"\*\*

\*\*To avoid incorrect conclusions, WW3 is NOT between Russia and the world. Things are far more complicated than that, but we'll get to it later. I promise. ;)\*\*

\*\*As always, tell me what you guys think.\*\*

\*\*I\*\*

\*\*I\*\*

\*\*I\*\*

\*\*V\*\*

## 17. Scattered by the Storm - Chapter 6

Chapter 6.

Cold wind howled through the frozen winter night, but it wasn't strong enough to bother the sizable group of Night Furies flying westwards. The sky was dark and full of clouds, making them practically invisible. The moon provided some insignificant amount of light, and luckily it was more than enough for the dragons to continue safely on their course.

They all flew in a well organized fashion: the oldest and youngest Furies were in the middle, with most of the clan around them in a wide circle. Pairs of Guards were roughly half an hour of flight ahead, beside, and behind of the formation, scanning the area for any potential danger. The remaining seven dragons were a day ahead of the group, preparing a landing site for the majority, resting, and then going forward again to their next stop.

At a certain point, the main formation of the Furies began to spread out a bit, and under any other circumstances, Lohengrin would've rushed ahead to intervene and shepherd everyone to their spots. But this time, he didn't do a thing, because he knew exactly what's causing the slight disarray. Almost everyone were glancing back towards the southeast.

Towards the direction of Toemnir valley.

Even Lohengrin couldn't resist of taking one last look at the place. Everyone's heart was heavy with the farewell. The valley wasn't just a place to live. It was a placeholder for an uncountable amount of memories, old and sometimes very vivid and dear ones. Generations upon generations lived and died in that valley, uncaring about the rest of the world because they could be safe and happy there. Now, all of them became root-less in a blink of an eye. There were no promises of a secure future anymore. Everyone had a hard time accepting that Toemnir valley ceased to exist, and they have to move forward in order to survive.

Lohengrin felt his throat clench, as he too took one last glance at home. Forty-five years ago, many Furies, including his own parents died, to ensure that the clan can remain home. He couldn't help but feel that he's dishonouring their sacrifice by moving everyone away.

But regardless of how bad everyone felt about it, they had to leave. They couldn't afford overstaying their welcome, they didn't have the numbers anymore to put up an all-out fight. It was emotionally hard but everyone knew deep inside that this is the only logical option they had left. Lohengrin was the first to become aware of that, and he spent hours upon hours in the Halls of Enlightenment, to see if he can find a suitable place mentioned there. Much to the luck of all, a late Elder left a detailed description of the whole continent including a fascinating map carved into one of the caves' walls. The chamber was pretty deep inside the cave system, but the reward was well worth all the effort.

The wise foresight of the unknown Night Fury gave Clan Toemnir another chance. And Lohengrin was determined not let that chance go waste.

\* \* \*

><p>"<em>WHAT? ! "<em>

Lohengrin sighed, and thought that speaking to Lenhardt privately, out of hearing distance from the rest of the clan, was a sound idea after all. Convincing his mate about his plan proved to be easier than expected, convincing his son looked like be a tad more time-consuming.

"\_Dad, you can't be serious!"\_ Lenny burst out \_"There's got to be another way!"\_

"\_Look.\_" Lohengrin said calmly \_"I thought over every option I have. This will be the best for everyone."\_

"\_But I don't know anything about being a Leader!"\_ Lenny protested.

Lohengrin tilted his head a bit, shooting a questioning glance at him.

"\_Lenny, that's not true.\_"

"\_Umm... It is?"\_ Lenny asked back, mimicking his father's expression.

"\_Then let's talk it over, son. A couple of years ago, you asked met why do I have to spend so much time away from home, meddling into everyone's business. Do you remember what my answer was?"\_

Lenny swallowed tensely, and sat back on his haunches. After a few moments, he hesitantly began:

"\_You said... you explained that being a Leader isn't about ordering others around. It is more about being with them, helping with tasks and supporting. That showing care towards anyone with problems is

more important than exercising authority."—

"\_Precisely." \_Lohengrin nodded. "\_Let me explain it more. The lowest ranking Night Guard is the Guard-Aspirant. What does it do? Mostly patrolling and keeping an eye out. A few other things are there as well, but patrolling is the majority. Then comes the regular Guard. What does it do? Mostly patrols. Let's jump a few steps forward and see what Salkonyr's doing."—

"\_He's mostly on patrol?"— Lenny asked.

"\_Yes. You know why? Because nobody in charge should expect something from its subordinates which the leading one wouldn't do. Oh yes, Salko leads every Guard. But he doesn't just order them to fly here and fly there, he also takes part in the actual work, too. I let the prime Hunters, Guards, Elders do their own tasks because they are experts their field. But I do help them out; my job is to help out everyone. To do that, one only needs a set of good wings to fly enough, and a clever mind to think. You don't need to tell the Hunter how to hunt, Lenny. But you help them out, and in exchange, you can rely on their expertise when it comes to decide about searching for new hunting grounds for example. As a Leader, I am the highest ranking dragon of our clan. And because I am above everyone, I have to be fit to help out anyone or even replace them in their duties, in addition to commanding them. This is why our community works; if I do nothing all day and just shout orders and expect to be serviced, it would only breed discontent and eventual violence."—

At this point, Lohengrin took a deep breath before going on:

"\_I'm not saying that this is easy. There's a lot of responsibility on my shoulders, because my decisions can affect the lives of many. But I don't always have to make the hard decisions alone."—

Lenhardt looked like he's a bit less stressed out, but he still had concerns:

"\_Then why me? You've just said that any dragon could do this!"—

"\_If we think it over, you're the only logical candidate." \_Lohengrin elaborated\_. "Our family gave each and every Leader to this clan since its foundation. The entire Clan trusts us. Selecting someone who's not related to us would cause disagreements, and it could eventually break the clan apart. If I selected a Guard, the Hunters would protest. If I selected a Hunter, the Guards would protest. If I had re-formed the Council of Elders again, everyone would protest. Lacking one strong leading dragon in times like this would be counter-productive to say the least."—

"\_That leaves Mom and me."— Lenny concluded sadly.

"\_Well, yes. And I'm not exaggerating at all when I say that your mother would have an even tougher job at keeping things together than you."—

"\_Why?"—

"\_Ever since you were little, I've been explaining and trying to teach both you and Nyssie a great deal about what am I doing and why.

You already have an advantage, you already know more about what to do and how than anyone else, including your mother. And..."\_ Lohengrin stopped for a moment and stared deeply into his son's eyes \_"I wouldn't even consider trusting you with this, if I knew that you weren't capable handling it."\_

"\_But... what makes you think I could do it?"\_ Lenhardt asked desperately

"Firstly, you're modest, which is a trait of a good Leader."\_ his father smiled \_"Maybe you haven't noticed it, but during the last days, you've earned quite a reputation among the others."\_

"All I did was trying to be at the right place at the right time!"\_ Lenny protested.

"And by that, you gave valuable support to many your clanmates, exactly when they were in need of it."\_

After a few seconds of heavy silence, Lenhardt sighed:

"Do I have a choice here?"\_

Lohengrin's ears twitched as the smile slowly faded away from his face.

"Of course you have. If you say no, I can try to find someone else."\_

"I..."\_ Lenny began hesitantly \_"When I heard that you wanted to go after Nyssie and the others, I wanted to ask you to let me accompany you..."\_

"Son... I am willing to risk my own life, but there's no way I'll put yours on the line as well."\_

"But-\_

"You still don't understand." \_Lohengrin swallowed tensely before going on \_"There's a good chance I won't make it back either.\_"

"But you still want to go!" \_Lenny cried out.

"We have missing clanmates, including your sister. What kind of a leader, what kind of a father I would be if I asked someone to save them instead of me?"\_

Lenny hung his head in resignation, and let out a sorrowful sigh.

"I just... I wish none of this had ever happened to us."\_

Lohengrin walked over to his son, sat down beside him and threw his wing around his back to comfort him.

"So do all who live to see such times, but \_\_that is not for them to decide. All we \_\_have to decide is what to do with the\_\_time that is given to us."\_

\* \* \*

><p>Every day was mostly the same for Clan Toemnir. The Night Furies departed right after the sun vanished under the horizon, heading west all night, and touched down at the designated resting spot the forward scouts cleared the day before them. Fatigue was taking its toll on everyone, organising hunting parties was a nightmare, food was scarce, and after Lohengrin inspected the general state of everyone, he decided to get all the clan together and rest for a day or two. Ten nights after their departure from the Shalnar ridges, they were roughly halfway towards their destination when they eventually found a wide river with a few sizable islands on it, which looked decent enough to serve as a temporary accommodation.</p>

Everyone seemed indescribably relieved upon hearing about the rest, and the promise of decent food and actual sleeping time. But despite the lucky conditions, Lohengrin did not allow the safety restrictions to loosen up: Most activities had to happen at night, and daytime-flying had to be kept at the minimum in order to keep a low profile. The caution was necessary, because there were a few human settlements just a couple of hours from their current location, and nobody wanted to take any chances.

But nevertheless, the slow-down of the pace at least allowed the Furies to take care of each other.

Salkonyr and Faelynn for example, who'd barely seen each other since the beginning of the clan's move, could spend time fishing together in the shallows around the northern tip of the island.

"Are you sure you're all right?"

"For the grace of the Spirits, Salko!" Faelynn burst out "I've told you like a thousand times already, I'm expecting an egg, not ill!"

"I know!" he said defensively "I'm just concerned about both of you!"

Faelynn took a deep breath, and the genuinely worried expression of her mate calmed her down quickly.

"I... understand." she said softly "But I still have around twelve days left."

Salkonyr walked up to her to press his chest against hers and rub his chin on her brow.

"I know I'm taking it too far sometimes, but with everything a bit messy lately, I'm just..."

"It's alright." Faelynn comforted him, then a smile appeared on her features "Besides, you look cute when you're making that worrisome face."

"Oh come on, be quiet, you're ruining my reputation!" Salkonyr grinned.

They both chuckled but as both of them gazed to their reflections on

the water, Faelynn sadly spoke up:

"\_I look so fat.\_"

"\_No you aren't!"\_ Salkonyr protested.

"\_I am.\_"

"\_No!\_"

"\_Yes.\_"

"\_No!\_"

"\_Yes.\_"

"\_No!\_"

"\_Shut up!\_"

"\_You shut up!\_"

"\_How about both of you shutting up, someone's trying to fish here!"\_ an angry voice called at them. Salkonyr turned his head to see one of the younger Guards, who quickly deflated under the weight of the First Guard's glare.

"\_Oh, I'm sorry I didn't-\_"

"\_It would be a waste of you're abilities if you'd be tasked to bury the insides of leftover prey for the rest of your life, don't you think, Menagar?"\_

"\_Umm... I agree, sir?"\_ came the frightened reply.

"\_Good, now get lost.\_"

"\_Aye!\_"

Salkonyr watched the younger dragon hastily disappear into the forest behind them, then turned back to his chuckling mate.

"\_Thankfully, you still have some reputation left." \_Faelynn commented.

"\_Thankfully.\_" he replied dryly. \_"Now, where were we at?"\_

"\_We've just agreed that I look fat.\_"

"\_No, we did not! Let's have a deal: I'll stop pestering you about your well-being, and you stop saying nonsense to yourself, okay? When I say you look beautiful, you \_\_\*\*are\*\*\_\_ beautiful, understood?"\_

"\_At ease First Guard, you're off duty today!"\_ Faelynn smirked, and gave her mate's cheek a grateful lick \_"Although you look cute when you're angry, too."\_

"\_Yeah, and dangerous.\_" Salkonyr grinned at her.

"\_Poor Menagar can vouch for that!"\_ Faelynn laughed.

\* \* \*

><p>Now that the clan stopped moving for a few days, Elder Tamaana had the chance to send out a few youngsters to collect whatever herbs were available on this island, for the chance of offering proper treatment to anyone who might need it. There were quite a few Furies with minor injuries such as scratches, bruises, gashes, or even strained joints, and although these would heal quickly, appropriate ointments will make it much quicker and painless.</p>

Then there were some dragons who especially needed the additional treatment, like Ohrana. Her case was one of the toughest Elder Tamaana had to face during her long years as Healer, it took every bits of her experience and knowledge to prevent what's left of her eye from getting infected. Thankfully, Ohrana was recovering fairly well from the trauma, but it saddened the Elder that there's nothing she can do to give Ohrana her sight back. At least she wasn't alone, a lonely and half-blind Night Fury's chance of survival are much lower.

"\_There we go."\_ the Elder said kindly, dipping her paw into her only remaining bowl which was full of her brown healing salve, and gently rubbing a last layer if it on Ohrana's face around the injured eye.

\_Please stay still for a bit to let it dry out, then you can go. Wash it off tomorrow morning.\_

"\_It feels a lot better now."\_ Ohrana admitted.

"\_Unfortunately, herbs in winter are not accessible, so I had to do with roots, tree bark, and the pawful of camomile I have managed to save from my reserves. It will help, but not as much as it could.\_"

"\_Never mind that"\_ Ohrana said leniently \_"I'm sure once we arrive to our new home, you'll have plenty of resources to choose from. And without your help, I doubt I'd even be alive.\_"

Their conversation was interrupted by a huge dragon landing just a few steps away from them.

"\_I'd like to call next.\_" Lohengrin announced sourly.

Elder Tamaana immediately turned her full attention towards him.

"\_We have just finished, what is the problem, my Leader?"\_

Instead of speaking, Lohengrin lifted his right forepaw to show a rather large thorn sticking out from it.

"\_Oh, I see.\_" Tamaana stepped closer to examine the paw\_ "Hunting accident, I presume?"\_

Lohengrin's glare wandered towards Ohrana who bore a curious expression. Then he swallowed and looked back to the Elder who was still expecting his answer.

"\_Ehm... Something like that... I... may have fallen into a thorny

bush when I chased a rabbit-"\_

"\_Of course you did!"\_ Ohrana exclaimed "Lohengrin you can't be serious!"\_

A resigned sigh left Lohengrin's mouth.

"Ohrana, please..."\_

"After all these years?!"\_

"Ohrana..."\_

"Could you fill me in the details?"\_ Elder Tamaana turned towards the younger dragoness, who began to chuckle.

"He's still hunting from the air when the prey's in a forest."\_

The Elder looked at Lohengrin with a shocked expression.

"By the Spirits, really?!"\_

"Yeah, he's been doing it since he was a youngling, despite the fact that I told him like a hundred times!"\_

"Oh for crying out loud!"\_ Lohengrin exclaimed in annoyance "Could we analyse my flaws later and concentrate on the damn prickle in my damn paw?!"\_

The two dragoness' exchanged a meaningful look, then Tamaana leaned close to Lohengrin's raised paw.

"It went in pretty deeply."\_ She assessed with narrow eyes.

"Of course" \_ Ohrana cut in "because he raised his legs forward to blunt the impact from the miscalculated dive!"\_

"Yeah, yeah, hilarious, really."\_ Lohengrin grumped at the chuckling dragoness. "Look, I admit it, you were right all the time, I was wrong, now I pay the price for it, I won't do it again. Is that what you wanted to hear?"\_

"Oh well, I guess the more things change, the more they remain the same."\_ Ohrana grinned, then turned to Elder Tamaana "I'll come back tomorrow for the next treatment, okay?"\_

"Of course. Take care of yourself." \_Tamaana replied, and after they nodded a goodbye to each other, Ohrana took off. Both she and Lohengrin watched the dragoness leave, then Lohen let out a relieved huff.

"Finally."\_

"I have to say" \_ Tamaana began in a chatting tone "I find it most amusing that a dragon of your calibre can still obtain such a ridiculously amateurish hunting injury."\_

"Please, give me a break!" \_ Lohengrin cried out desperately.

"\_Nevertheless, you did well to show it to me. The wound is deep, so it is safer to use some salve around it to avoid it getting worse."\_

"\_As far as I know, you're short on supplies, you shouldn't waste it on a small thing like this."\_ Lohengrin protested.

"\_Let me be the judge of that. Besides, I cannot carry the salve with myself, so I will have to use all of it before we are on our way again. And you only need a small amount."\_

"\_Alright, do what you have to."\_ Lohengrin agreed reluctantly. Shortly, Tamaana bit down on the thorn and pulled it out in one smooth motion. Then, she carefully rubbed some of her ointment into the wound. In the meantime, a rather private question began to formulate at the back of Lohengrin's mind, and he decided to ask it carefully.

"\_Elder Tamaana?"\_

"\_Hm?"\_

"\_I noticed that you and Elder Zorhen had a history together."\_

"\_Why does this interest you?"\_ She asked without looking up from her ministrations.

"\_Zorhen was my mentor for years"\_ Lohengrin began \_"he taught me a lot, and later I always considered him as a friend of mine. But lately I realized that I barely knew him at all. And something's giving me the feeling that you knew him better than anyone else."\_

"\_That's right."\_ Tamaana sighed. \_"We did have a history together."\_

Lohengrin patiently waited for the Elder to continue, but after a while, he had to ask:

"\_And?"\_

"\_And it is a private matter, it holds no relevance now, and because we are in the middle of a crisis, I do not wish to discuss this, at least not now."\_ Tamaana said nonchalantly, but after a look at Lohengrin's expression, she decided to add:

"\_Let it be enough that I wasn't always the wrinkly, mottled gray healer as you always knew me, and he wasn't the grouchy omniscient mentor as you always knew him. Hundreds of winters ago we used to be a couple."\_

The last sentence spawned an army of questions inside of Lohengrin, but Elder Tamaana turned around and walked away from him.

\* \* \*

><p>After two days of rest, Lohengrin knew that the time has come. He grew more restless with each passing day, he knew that the later he departs, the less chance he has left to find the missing Night

Furies. But the sooner he leaves, the less time he has to spend with his son, teaching and trying to prepare him for the upcoming trials.<p>

And he dreaded them moment of farewell.

During the clan's third night on the island, he collected himself, and announced his leave to the others. They did not take it well; they kept asking lots of questions and some dragons openly voiced their concerns, protests and dissatisfaction, until Lenhardt stepped forward and pulled off a speech that made Lohengrin insanely proud.

"\_Bound brothers and sisters of Clan Toemnir! I understand that the recent change of events may seem disagreeable for most of us, but nobody can deny its necessity. We are missing five Furies, friends and relatives to many. We must not forget about their lives, and if there is a chance of recovering them, we have to take it. While that happens, I will continue to lead us on our path towards our new home, and you all can trust me that I will not hesitate to use whatever skills, knowledge and strength I am in possession of, for the benefit of all.\_"

The crowd of Furies were all in an astonished silence, and Lenhardt looked like he's getting afraid when they all began to cheer.

\_ "LIIEN LENHARDT VALDR!" \_

After the ovation slowly died away, Lohengrin and Lyara walked over their son.

"\_So?" \_ Lenny asked \_ "How was I?" \_

Without saying a word, Lyara rushed forward and threw his forelegs around Lenny's neck, hugging him close. Lohengrin just sat down with a smile on his face, and simply said:

"\_You were awesome." \_

Seeing his son beaming, Lohengrin let out a content sigh. At least he can be sure that he's leaving the clan in good paws.

Later in the night he looked up his friends, Faelynn, Salkonyr and Garenald, and said farewell to them privately. Then he spoke to all the Elders, and politely asked them to help out Lenhardt and give him advice should he be in need of them. His heart was already becoming heavier, and the toughest part, saying farewell to his family was still ahead of him.

He found Lyara and Lenhardt lying together under a tall scotch fir. When he saw how peacefully they are sleeping, he just had to stop, walk away a bit and sit down in a clearing. Never before in his life had he felt so torn inside. Part of his heart pulled him towards his mate and son, while the other half urged him to find his daughter.

He sat there for so long, he lost track of the time. Eventually, he heard a quiet rustle coming from behind him, and he didn't need to turn around to guess who's coming up to him.

Lyara sat down and leaned against him, resting her head on his shoulder.

"\_What woke you up?"\_ Lohengrin asked quietly.

"\_I missed you."\_ she replied simply.

The short sentence stung Lohengrin inside.

"\_Lya, I... I-\_

"\_You have to go Lohen."\_ Lyara said calmly \_"You cannot falter now. "\_

"\_I know. I just hate to leave you alone. Both of you. "\_

"\_Lohengrin."\_ Lyara stared deeply into her mate's eyes \_"You know that I would go as far as the world's end with you."\_-

Lohengrin tenderly nuzzled her.

"\_And we both know that Lenny's going to need you more than ever in the upcoming time."\_-

"\_I had to try it."\_ Lyara sighed.

Lohengrin noticed a tear rolling down on his mate's cheek; he leaned over to lick it away. He rubbed his nose against her and purred into her ear until she was calm again.

"\_I don't know how far I have to go, I don't know how long it will take, but there is no such force in this world that can keep me away from you. I \_\_\*\*will\*\*\_\_ come back, I promise."\_-

There was little that words could do to calm Lyara down as she watched Lohengrin slowly blending into the starless, cloudy night sky. She shook herself to suppress her urge to cry; both her mate and her son needed her to stay strong.

Because she is also not the one to let others down. She and Lohengrin established that many years ago, and she had no intention to change that.

With a heavy sigh, she turned around and walked back to her son. She noticed that Lenny's tail twitched and paws flexed occasionally, he must've been having a dream. She couldn't unnoticed his son's expression: weary, concerned, exhausted...

She saw the same exact expression on Lohengrin's face countless times.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>AN Whoah, finally a new chapter. Lately I've had quite a few distractions, job-issues and chaotic weekends, but I'm back, full speed!\*\*

\*\*It's time to pick up the pace a little bit, next time we'll see how

Lohengrin manages to find a world even crazier than his! ; )\*\*

\*\*See you all, and tell me what you think in the meantime!\*\*

\*\*I\*\*

\*\*I\*\*

\*\*I\*\*

\*\*V\*\*

## 18. Scattered by the Storm - Chapter 7

Chapter 7.

The cold winter crosswind blew heavily against his wings, but Lohengrin used it to help gain as much altitude as possible. He nostalgically remembered all those flying lessons Elder Zorhen gave him many years ago, and now they became extremely useful. When one has to fly above dangerous areas, altitude can mean the difference between life and death. The higher he is, the more speed he can gain to dodge risky situations, thus the more chance he has to survive. Not to mention, when one's only a barely visible tiny black dot in the sky, it's quite a hard target to hit.

He headed southwest, deep into the continent. He decided to fly in the most energy-conserving way he could, so when he reached his travelling height, he barely moved his wings, just glided with the wind's support and occasionally altered his course with his tailfins. Still, he knew how great a danger he is in. Because he couldn't keep himself around rivers all the time, finding something to eat was an issue. Every hour he spent on hunting meant less flying time before his next stop. Finding a relatively safe sleeping spot was also an issue, the vast plains in front of him offered little to no shelter.

But even when he was relatively well rested and fed, he still had to avoid the bigger human population centres, which was probably the toughest thing of all.

Back during his training years, he learned that humans are quite numerous, and they have a tendency to gather and live in huge, self-made settlements. According to Elder Zorhen, the sizes of these settlements varied between a few dozen to hundreds of thousands or even more souls. Lohengrin couldn't even imagine the dragon analogue of a place like that, where thousands of his own kind would live together. But now as he saw these with his own eyes, he was both mesmerized and confused. How can the humans even feed such a mass of population? What do they eat in the first place? He seriously doubted they would eat dragons; the needed effort to catch one is not in line with the reward. Do they have herbivorous tendencies, then? That would offer a solution to the feeding issues, but who had ever heard about herbivores with such a level aggression and weaponry that would put some predators to shame? That doesn't make sense.

Even the landscape was weird. So far, Lohengrin lived his whole life in a place which was grown and shaped by nature entirely. The biggest

outside influence was weather. Since he began to move the clan, he heard reports about his scouts sighting strange or unexplainable things, but seeing them closely was a whole other thing.

The humans seemed to dig, build, destroy and rearrange everything they encountered. The first strange things Lohengrin noticed were gray lines on the ground. During one night, he landed on one of those gray lines, in an effort to try figuring out its purpose. He used his own wingspan to measure how wide it was, and he was just able to touch both edges of this hardened gray path. So it was relatively wide, although later he saw even wider artificial paths. Why would the humans need all these? They don't even feel good to walk on! And why do they need so many?

Seeing the human-made paths was only the beginning, the landscape was full of indescribable, unnatural objects, and he had no clue what are they for. He saw series of pillars in varying size and shape, only connected by something long, thin and black. The artificial paths continued above rivers and under mountains, forming something that reminded Lohengrin of a spider's web from high above. The gray lines connected certain spots, and they met each other at other spots, seemingly without too many obvious reasons. Sometimes he saw a few of those rectangular-shaped weird contraptions the humans used to travel with, but those were much smaller and less dangerous than the ones that attacked Toemnir valley. Lohengrin even found one deserted in a ditch right beside the gray path. He touched down, and examined it closely, sniffing and poking it from different directions. But he couldn't figure out much, what made the thing move forward for example, was way beyond him. The contraption looked interesting, with its boxy appearance, and it even had coverable holes to enter, and when the entrances were open, the covers stuck out of the body like a dragon's open wing. He carefully peeked inside, and became a bit braver after he made sure that the thing was completely empty. There were a few strange shaped objects inside of the contraption, some of them were soft and easy to tear, others were harder but definitely not rock or even wood levels of solidity. There were a multitude of scents inside, foreign scents of unknown materials, fading traces of humans, and a stronger, sweeter scent which came from a tiny, hanging thing which had the shape of a stylized pine tree. Lohengrin decided to examine the smelly thing better, so while he raised his head, he stepped on the middle of the round thing next to him...

When suddenly the contraption made a whiny sound.

It was so surprising; his alarmed reflexes dragged him out quickly, smashing his head into the thing's roof and tumbling backwards.

The high-pitched noise died away almost immediately. Lohengrin got up on all fours again, and let out a surprised huff as he rubbed his aching head with a foreleg. Then he approached the interior of the contraption again, and carefully placed a forepaw to the middle of the round thing inside. Nothing. Then he gently applied some pressure: the sound flared up again.

"\_Unbelievable.\_" Lohengrin mumbled with narrowed eyes, and stepped off the round thing to cease the sound \_"Controllable sound emission from a thing that's not even alive... Maybe it's a mean of communication...?"

Eventually, he decided not to waste any more time, and took off

again. Distractions like this seemed unnecessary, but he needed information about what is he's up against. One cannot fight an enemy effectively if one has little to no knowledge about it.

\* \* \*

><p>There were also quite a few things which marvelled Lohengrin, like the humans' ability to create light <em>without<em> fire. That was a concept he couldn't wrap his head around. Those vast population centres were all like bright, gigantic anthills in the night, there were pillars emitting light beside the gray paths, even those moving contraptions emitted light, and these all looked like tiny suns. Except that they only worked in the night, and seemingly went to sleep in the daytime.

After a few days, he saw something that was not only inexplicably flabbergasting, but it also disproved each and every theory he previously had about why the humans attacked his kin.

It was late afternoon, when he discovered faint traces of fire and smoke in the air, mixed with the bitter smell which he first sensed during the attack on Toemnir valley every time the crawling contraptions fired. He immediately changed his course towards the source, and after a short while, he spotted thin trails of smoke coming from the ground. He decided to do a wide circle around the area, and only investigate from the cover of the clouds, at least until nightfall.

After the sun settled, he used the darkness to approach the area, and dived into the small forest which was next to the source of the smoke trails. Immediately as he landed, a putrid scent hit his nostrils: the smell of dried blood, death and decaying flesh. Following the scent, he carefully sneaked through the forest, until he arrived to a clearing.

The clearing was full of human bodies.

He quickly counted them; there were at least a hundred corpses lying on the ground. He began to examine the remains, which looked and smelled several days old. They were all humans, but Lohengrin had no ideas how to determine their genders or affiliations. They all wore similarly fashioned green and brown outer skins, which they used to cover their bodies. Another disturbing thing was that their forepaws were all tied together behind their backs, effectively rendering them unable to fight. He tried to figure out what killed them, and he soon discovered that they all had bloody holes in their napes. As if they have been shot from behind...

Realization struck him like a lightning. The humans are killing each other! But this one conclusion immediately spawned dozens of new questions. Why? What does his clan have to do with all of this? Could it be possible that they had been caught in the crossfire between two feuding groups? No, then they wouldn't have kidnapped anyone...

He had to sit down to think this over. This whole thing suddenly seemed to make even less sense than before, but it was definitely useful information. Human society is not united. Which means there is a chance that not all of humanity is hostile towards dragons. There's proof here that those who hate dragons have human enemies. And if the enemy of my enemy is my friend, then...

Lohengrin shook his head. The idea of friendly humans seemed like a long shot, but after this massacre here he couldn't rule it out entirely anymore. Curious to see if he could figure out a few more things, he headed out from the forest, towards the smoke trails he saw earlier. And now that he saw the remains, he had a pretty good idea of what happened.

The field in front of him was full of destroyed contraptions and the remains of their dead users. After taking a closer look, he could determine that despite the fact that the things looked roughly the same, they had different colours and markings, indicating at least two different group's presence in the battle. This further supported his theory about humans fighting humans. Seeing the disposition of the wrecks, the bodies and the tracks of other vehicles, he could relatively easily figure out what happened in this area a few days ago.

The two groups of humans fought here with their deadly tools. The winners probably caught the fleeing survivors of the other group, gathered them together and wiped them out.

But the reason for all of this proved elusive to Lohengrin, and he decided to let the new knowledge sink in, and continue his flight. The picture is still not entirely clear yet, but he's definitely making progress at figuring out what exactly happened.

And determining what happened, who did and why, is the first step on the long road of getting the missing Night Furies back.

\* \* \*

><p>During the weeks of continuous flight westwards, uncertainty and doubt began to wiggle inside Lohengrin more and more. He knew he has to go somewhere generally west from Toemnir valley. But the landscape under him seemed endlessly huge, and Lohengrin started to feel like he's trying to find one certain ant in a forest.</p>

But he never even thought about calling off the search. He suspected that it will be quite hard, and he knew that if he turns back now, he'll never see his daughter again. Every time he reached this thought, his wings started to pump harder as the anger swelled inside him. He used this anger to fuel his aching and fatigued muscles. As a smaller side-objective he decided to check out one of the larger human population centres, to see if he can find any more useful information. As he flew, sometimes he saw flashes of light on the horizon, accompanied by growling thunder which he now knew were the sounds of explosions blunted by the distance, and once he flew across another field filled with the remains of some kind of battle. Occasionally, he saw those human-made flying things again, similar to the one which paralysed his clan at Toemnir valley. The sight made him wonder if there are other dragon clans in danger, but the flying thing was too far a way and too fast for him to intervene.

Heading a bit towards north, he eventually saw the sea. Seeing water stretching for as far the eye can see was another completely new thing for him; so far he only knew the sea from the tales of the Elders. As the seabed curled, creating a gulf, there was a relatively big human hive there, which looked interesting enough to warrant investigation, so Lohengrin searched for a spot in the forests which

was not too far to the south of the hive, and landed there. Unfortunately, the best thing he could find for food was a flimsy rabbit, but it was better than nothing. After "dinner" he still had a few hours until sunset, so he decided to find a comfortable-looking tree, and threw his tail around a lower but stronger branch of it to hang upside down, covered himself tightly with his wings and dozed off.

The night was cloudy, and cold wind howled from the see. Lohengrin cautiously sneaked into the hive, always sticking to the shadows, using the uncountable number of angular buildings to remain out of sight. According to his observation, humans loved straight lines and symmetry when they evolved places like this. He saw a few humans walking along the gray paths, but they all carried lights and those shooting sticks. Judging from the second hides and the tools they wore, Lohengrin assumed that they belong to the same group which attacked Toemnir valley. Once, he saw a patrol of two humans and a four-legged creature which looked like a tame wolf; he immediately retreated and did a huge circle around them to avoid the wolf catching his scent and alerting anyone to his presence. The lack of unarmed people bugged Lohengrin inside; this hive seemed far too huge for the few humans he saw. Maybe most of them are hiding inside their self-made caves? It is possible; the whole area of the hive positively reeked of restlessness and fear.

Around the middle of the hive, he found a man-made island. That alone was impressive, but the activity on the island amazed him more. He assumed that humans cannot or have limited ability to see in the dark, so the whole area was lighted pretty well. He saw giant, floating contraptions, and an army of men working around them. He discovered a long metal log, which stuck its head into the open belly of the floating thing, and lifted up one of those crawling metal shooting-things he knew quite well now. It put thing down the thing to the ground, humans crawled inside of it and took it away while the metal log restarted the whole procedure.

The sight of a well-organized work of that magnitude would have marvelled Lohengrin, should the circumstances have been different. Instead of that, he'd found human ingenuity frightening. If they can invent and craft such huge and complicated tools for a simple task of taking things from one place to another, what can they come up with when they really want to kill someone?

He decided that he'd had enough. Looking for a way outside of the dangerous area, he decided to creep into the water, and swim out. As a dragon, he didn't have any problems with holding his breath back for a longer time, and his wings and tailfins took him forward at a great speed. He went as deep as he could, only occasionally coming to the surface to see which direction to go. Getting out of the city was relatively easy that way, but the water was disgustingly dirty, filled with oily and smelly things that really shouldn't have been there. But as he went further and further outside of the human hive, the water became gradually clearer, much to his relief. After he deemed that he's far enough from the humans, he kicked himself into the air, and began to fly again. For the next hour or so, he flew above the see to get even farther from unwanted company before turning towards the land again.

The lack of success dissatisfied him. What he saw in the human hive was interesting, but it didn't bring him any closer towards finding

Nyssie. At least he found out that humans are even more divided than he thought, if they have to contain the unarmed ones with armed ones. For a more accurate source of information, he would need someone to talk with. He doubted that humans would be able to understand him; he concluded that he needs to find dragons somewhere.

\* \* \*

><p>For days of flight, Lohengrin couldn't spot any dragon, only more humans. But these humans were different than the ones he saw previously. They were mostly unarmed, the hides they wore were a lot more colourful, and they all seemed to be in disarray. Lohengrin saw many of them sitting in their contraptions, shouting and whining with each other as they couldn't move on the gray path because it was already full. Others were running, certain ones beat or shot other ones... the whole situation was a mess. Sometimes he could barely avoid the violence, and it really made it a lot harder to find dragons in the area.</p>

Then, one day, luck finally smiled at him.

He was in a forest when he heard distant whiffs of talk. His ears perked as he rushed towards the direction the voices came from. But as he saw that he's close to a clearing, he slowed down, and approached silently, for the sake of safety. He sneaked in parallel with the clearing, until the wind was from the exact opposite direction. Then, he slowly approached the clearing, and soon, the voices were loud enough to understand. Now that he listened to it, he could make out several draconic voices, but they were too varied in tone to belong to one specific kind of dragons. Not that he had extensive knowledge about other dragon kinds; he only saw a few carved silhouettes in the Cave of Enlightenment many years ago.

Hoping for the best, he swallowed, took a deep breath, and walked forward, out of the bushes.

"\_Greetings.\_"

The crowd of various dragons in front of him ceased their chatter immediately, and turned towards him. He saw two-headed Zipplebacks, sturdy Gronckles, spiky-tailed Deadly Nadders, Changewings, Monstrous Nightmares and Terrible Terrors to name a few. A Nightmare spoke up:

"\_Oh look, we have a new friend here! Where are you from?"\_

The lack of suspicion or caution surprised Lohengrin.

"\_From far away." \_he answered\_ "I have to ask, what kind of clan is this?"\_

Now the other dragons looked surprised, even uncomprehending. As much as Lohengrin could tell, they all looked relatively young.

"\_What are you talking about?"\_

"\_You all live here together?"\_ Lohengrin asked again.

"\_No, of course not."\_ a Nadder explained \_"Our humans put us here to

hide, we don't know why. We all used to live in the city."\_\_

Lohengrin blinked as parts of the previous sentences echoed inside his head. 'Our humans?' 'Hide?' 'In the city?'

"\_What's a city and why would anyone choose to live with humans?"\_\_

Now all the dragons looked at Lohengrin as if they doubted his mental health. In exchanges, Lohengrin also doubted theirs, so he wasn't offended.

"\_A city is a place where a bunch of humans live together."\_ the previous Nadder said.

"\_Why would anyone not choose to live with humans?"\_\_ a Gronckle asked from Lohengrin, giving him a clueless expression.

"\_Guys!"\_\_ the Nadder looked around \_"I think he's one of them wild ones."\_\_

The dragons all let out a suddenly understanding coo.

Now Lohengrin was getting angry.

"\_Keep insulting me and I'll show you how wild am I!"\_\_ he growled.

"\_Hey, hey, we didn't mean to offend you!"\_\_ a Nightmare tried to calm him \_"Maybe one of your kind could explain this to you more, could it?"\_\_

Seeing the other dragons nodding, she continued:

"\_Then maybe Aurek could help you out."\_\_

"\_Great idea!"\_\_

"\_Yeah!"\_\_

They all began to call out, and in a short while, a young Night Fury came rushing from the forest.

"\_Hey guys, what's up... oh WOW!"\_\_

The young, golden-eyed Night Fury's face turned from curious to joyous as he noticed Lohengrin. He gleefully rushed over him, bumped his head into the older dragon's shoulder and bounced around happily.

"\_You're like me, this is so awesome!"\_\_

Lohengrin dropped his jaw in shock, he was unable to say a thing. Noticing his helpless expression, one of the Gronckles chuckled and spoke up:

"\_Calm down Aurie, you're shocking our guest."\_ then he looked at Lohengrin \_"His name is Aurek. Aurek, let me introduce our friend who lives in the wilderness, his name is... ehm..."\_\_

"\_Lohengrin."\_ Lohen mumbled.

"\_What a cool name!"\_ Aurek exclaimed.

Lohengrin took an examining look at the youngling. Aurek looked only a couple years older than Lenhardt, but compared to his son, he was incomparably immature and hatchling-ish. Lohengrin strongly suspected that he had never seen a fellow Night Fury before. Nevertheless, he decided to play along.

"\_Hi, Aurek, nice to meet you."\_

"\_Nice to meet you too!"\_ came the excited response. The rest of the dragons chuckled at the young Fury's jumpiness, and the Gronckle came up with a proposition:

"\_Why don't you two take a walk and tell about eachother?"\_

"\_Great idea!"\_ Aurek exclaimed \_"C'mon, I know a brook nearby, let me show it to you!"\_

"\_Lead the way."\_ Lohengrin sighed, and followed the youngling, who continued to bounce around him, blabbering continuously.

"\_You're the first Night Fury I've ever seen, and you look so strong and cool! Are you going to live with us? Where are you from? You surely flew a lot! Do you know other dragons who are like us? I lived in the city since I was born! The others are nice but it's so great to meet you! I bet you're full of interesting stories about your travels, and..."\_

And it went on without a pause. During the long minutes of their walk, Lohengrin tried to figure out a way to ask about the things he wanted to know, without ruining the youngling's mood.

"\_Look... Aurek.\_

"\_Call me Aurie like everyone else!"\_ the youngling smiled.

"\_Okay. Umm... I'm just passing through here, and I accidentally bumped into you and your friends. I'm seeing a lot of things I don't understand, and I'm hoping you could help me out."\_

"\_Sure thing, fire away!"\_ Aurek nodded eagerly.

"\_Thanks.\_ Lohengrin smiled at him \_"So, how did you guys got together in the first place?"\_

"\_We all used to live in the city with our humans.\_"

Lohengrin narrowed his eyes.

"\_What do you mean by 'our humans'?"\_

"\_Y'know, it's common for them to accept us into their homes and live like a family. Sometimes they accept dogs and cats, but they love us dragons, too. They give us shelter, feed us and really treat us like family... you okay?"\_

As he heard all this, a variety of feelings swirled inside Lohengrin. He couldn't decide if this was bizarre, wrong, or harmless; arguments and counter-arguments battled inside his head and his puzzled state drew a weird expression on his face.

"\_Yeah... sure, I'm fine." \_he murmured \_"What is a city?"\_

"\_It's how humans call those places they live in large numbers. It's filled with houses, roads, cars-\_"

At this point, Lohengrin knew that this exchange isn't going anywhere. There were too many unknowns, and as the youngling answered one question, the explanation drew up two more. So Lohengrin decided to try mining out the knowledge from Aurek in a different way.

He stared deeply into the youngling's eyes and reached out with his mind, gently, not to startle him. As the youngling blabbered on, Lohengrin's mind established a connection with his, and began to scan through his memories. Thousands of images, impressions, definitions, feelings and scents flooded Lohengrin and he struggled to keep up his concentration and not to disturb Aurek.

Gaining information like this was a serious violation to privacy, and under any other circumstances, Lohengrin wouldn't even consider doing it. But desperate times need desperate measures, even if they are frowned upon for being unethical in the very least.

He also saw the boy's whole life: Aurek had no memories about his parents, after he hatched he was in an institution the humans had for housing orphaned dragons. There were a number of caretakers around, feeding him, keeping him clean and generally showed care towards him. At one day, a male and a female human came by with two of their younglings, and after a short while, they took Aurek home and named him. Their home was a spacious building at the outskirts of the city, with a huge fenced field behind it. Aurek spent most of his life there, raised by humans.

It really surprised Lohengrin that the youngling hadn't exaggerated when he called the humans his family: there really was a connection between them, one which Lohengrin thought as impossible before. The humans shared most of their lives with a dragon, relevant and irrelevant aspects alike. Lohengrin had mixed feelings towards Aurek now: part of him pitied him for having no idea what it means to be a Night Fury, having no idea how to hunt, fly properly, or behave like a dragon. But he still was happy this way, his adoptive family gave him everything he needed, and he never missed what he never experienced.

He carefully retreated from Aurek's mind, and asked another question. He had to force himself to remain calm despite the intense headache he had from mind-connection. Luckily, the youngling had no idea what happened.

Their chat went on but Lohengrin barely listened to what Aurek said, as his mind was still busy comprehending what he experienced earlier.

\* \* \*

><p>"<em>I'm not sure this is a good idea."</em> Lohengrin growled

tensely.

"\_Oh calm down, I told you they're cool!"\_ Aurek said to him.

Lohengrin rolled his eyes. The berating attitude of a Night Fury half of his size and quarter of his age was hard to endure, and the thought of approaching humans didn't help him to stay calm either.

He spent the night with the group of dragons in the forest. None of them knew why were they asked to hide, but it was their humans' wish to stay somewhere safe, so they naturally complied. Lohengrin suspected that this was a safety measure by the dragon-loving humans to protect them from the dragon-hating humans. While he felt some appreciation towards the effort, he had no idea how to tell these dragons that a large number of their beloved humans are massacring both their own kind and dragons as well.

When he asked the dragons that what they eat if they can't really hunt, they offered him to spend the night with them and see it in the morning. So now Lohengrin was standing beside the excited group while they seemingly awaited something to happen.

"\_How long do we-\_"

Lohengrin became silent as a familiar sound reached his ears. Turning his head towards the direction of the growling sound, soon he saw \_trucks\_ incoming as Aurek called them. It felt strange to relate definitions to things he didn't know by himself. The huge \_vehicles\_ rolled on six \_wheels\_ and they stopped at the edge of the forest. Humans jumped off from the \_plateaus\_, and began to load off \_barrels\_. Suddenly, Lohengrin realized what's going on.

"\_Are they feeding you?"\_ he asked.

"\_Yeah! Nice from them, eh?"\_ Aurek grinned at him.

Lohengrin shifted uncomfortably. The thought of humans feeding dragons which are unable to provide for themselves was disturbing and shameful from one side, and unselfishly kind from the other. Similarly disturbing was the fact that certain humans can kill your friends and destroy the place you lived while others may love you and treat you as family.

He was unable to form an exact opinion about humans anymore. Every time he saw them, they were all behaving differently. These dragons all seemed to trust these ones, as they put down their barrels and knocked them over to spill their contents of fish to the ground, the dragons all walked over to them, exchanged a few nuzzles and pats with the humans and started to eat undisturbedly. Meanwhile the humans were laughing and talking to each other as they watched the dragons. After some time, the humans approached their scaly friends again for another friendly exchange, like a farewell, then got inside the trucks and leaved.

When everyone finished eating and began to filter back into the forest, Aurek walked to Lohengrin again.

"\_Why didn't you eat?"\_ he asked.

"\_I'm not hungry.\_ Lohengrin lied. \_"Listen, Aurie, I'd like to tell you a few things before I leave."\_

"\_You have to leave so soon?"\_ Aurek cried out \_"Why can't you stay with us?"\_

Lohengrin sighed wearily.

"\_I have a family to take care of. I have to tell you that you must not trust every human you meet."\_

"\_But... why?"\_ he asked confusedly.

"\_Because every human you meet is different. So far, you only met nice ones because you were lucky. But not all of them are like the ones you know already. The ones I met killed a lot of my friends, kidnapped my daughter and destroyed my home."\_

Aurek backtracked away from him with jaws dropped until he tripped and fell on his haunches.

"\_Is this... true? It can't be! They are not the monsters you claim them to be!"\_ he cried out a high-pitched voice.

"\_I have no reason to lie to you.\_ Lohengrin stated \_"I was forced to leave my family and everyone I care for behind because of their actions. My clan never crossed the path of any human. But still, one day they attacked the valley we used to live in, murdered one-fourth of my clan, and took away my daughter who's around your age, and just as innocent as you are!"\_

"\_Currently there's a war going on between humans, and some of them kill or abducts dragons too. I don't know why. But the life you had previously is over, and you, as well as the rest of your friends have to adapt to the changing world around you. \_

While he heard this, Aurek was still gasping for air.

"\_I... you..."\_

"\_Listen to me, Aurek.\_ Lohengrin said softly \_"I know you don't know me, but I would never want anything bad happen to you, or your friends. No warning came for my clan, and I want you to avoid what I went through by saying be extremely careful with any new human you meet. And it would be high time to learn to provide for yourself."\_

Aurek opened his mouth to say something, then closed it and shook his head. After a few moments with a tone still shaky, he managed to muster up a desperate question:

"\_O-kay, but how? I don't know anything about hunting!"\_

"\_Your instincts are there, Aurek.\_ Lohengrin tried to comfort him \_"You and the others may not know how to behave like dragons, but when you start relying on your instincts instead of the things you already know, you can and will be successful. Practice, and the reward will come eventually."\_

"\_Are you sure you can't stay for a little bit to teach me something?"\_

The desperation in Aurek's voice made Lohengrin falter. He has to find Larany's as soon as possible. But can he, should he leave this youngling and his friends to their fate? After a long minute of reasoning himself, he found a compromise:

"\_Alright.\_" he sighed \_"I'll stay for one day, and teach you how to begin things. Then you have to practice, and after you've had some success, you can teach your friends too. Deal?"\_

The young Night Fury rushed up to him to rub his nose into his neck.

\* \* \*

><p>In the end, Aurek proved to be a talented apprentice, all those years of playing gave him good reflexes. Lohengrin was content with his progress, and he was relatively sure that he'll be able to survive alone after some practice. But the day quickly went away, and he did not dare to stay more. He gathered all of the dragons to describe the situation to them gave a few helpful bits of advice, and then left towards the direction of the setting sun.</p>

The venture into Aurek's mind gave him a somewhat better understanding towards the humans, but it was nothing more than a philosophical detour compared to the mystery of the missing Night Furies. He still had no idea how dragons are connected to this whole war-thing. He was still missing a crucial piece of the puzzle.

He spent days alone in his continuous flight westwards, up until one night, he arrived at a rather wooded region, and found a nice looking lake after crossing a river. He decided to rest his wings a bit at the eastern side of the lake, and stay there for a short sleep. And preferably have a quick snack of fish before it.

The touch of the water was clean pleasant, unlike the seawater at the docks he was at few weeks earlier. After leisurely catching a few fat carp, he was just about to curl up and rest a bit when he heard the exact thing he hoped not to hear for a long while.

Gunfire shattered the silence of the forest.

He immediately rocketed to his feet and took off. He heard the sharp sounds again, and this time, slightly different ones seemed to answer. After a minute of flight, he found the source of danger.

He saw a patrol of humans and an eight-wheeled vehicle cornering and trying to shoot another human, who hid behind the rocks in front of a cliff. The man had nowhere to go, he threw a few apple-sized objects towards his attackers which blew up in a way bigger explosion than its size should have allowed.

But the black uniform of the attackers told him what he needed. The enemy humans were trying to kill someone who's not from their ranks, and after some hesitation, Lohengrin decided to intervene. He did a half-roll and began to dive towards the armoured vehicle. As the wind began to whistle around his wings, he let loose a fireball, and pulled up to disappear above the forest.

The fireball coming from above blew the vehicle into pieces, splattering flaming scraps everywhere. This put the humans into disarray, as they began to shout. Lohengrin counted twelve of them as he came back for a second round, this time; he shot them from horizontal flight. A few scattered shots came in response, as the flaming wreck of the vehicle illuminated his outline, but Lohengrin knew exactly how to disappear quickly. By tempting the humans to stay near the fire to see, they completely ruined their own night vision, getting blind to their surroundings.

And they forgot about the human they were chasing before too.

With single, accurate shots, he began to take them out one by one, and since the rest gathered relatively close to each other, a well-placed fireball made short work of them.

The human quickly ran to the wreck to check the condition of his enemies. Meanwhile, Lohengrin silently touched down a few steps beside him. Taking a look at the back of the human, he was a bit unsure what to do. Establish contact? But how? They won't understand each other. Maybe if...

"\_Alright here goes nothing."\_ Lohengrin growled to himself.

The human, who was still edgy from the previous gunfight, swirled around as he heard the growl and pointed his weapon at him.

Lohengrin's instinctual response to the perceived threat was to gather up gas in his throat to launch a fireball...

Both of them stared at the other, ready to shoot and take life if necessary.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>AN: Ooh, so much tenshun! :)\* \*\*\*\*It was high time to speed up things a little bit, was it?\*\*

\*\*Oh, and I'm still waiting of somebody notices the LotR quote in the last chapter... Felt appropriate there. :)\*\*\*

\*\*As always, tell me what you think. Opinions and suggestions are always welcome.\*\*

\*\*I\*\*

\*\*I\*\*

\*\*I\*\*

\*\*V\*\*

## 19. Scattered by the Storm - Chapter 8

\*\*A/N I'm so sorry guys, but lately my personal matters went haywire, and I also suffered from a strong, acute writer's block. But let the world know: I AM BACK!\*\*

\*\*With a bunch of dragons, ofc. ;)\*\*

\* \* \*

><p>Chapter 8.</p>

The sun shone brightly, making the surface of the pond glisten with thousands of sparkles. Slowly but surely, a tiny frame's reflection began to appear on the surface. The hatchling frowned heavily from concentration, her tail swished slowly from left to right as her head drew closer and closer to the water. When her nose almost touched the surface, she slowly opened her mouth, revealing her set of fangs, then her head snapped forward like a snake's, straight into the water. A few seconds later, she emerged from the pond, with a fish fluttering helplessly in the grip of her jaw.

She quickly turned around and dropped her spoil to the grass. As she saw her father's proud smile, she began to bounce from happiness.

"\_I did it! I did it!"\_

"\_You surely did.\_" her father grinned. \_"You did exactly as we've shown to you, and now you have your reward."\_

Her mother stepped forward and lowered her head to nuzzle the hatchling, who happily purred in response.

"\_My little huntress does everything she can to impress Mommy and Daddy."\_ her mother purred into the hatchling's ears.

Upon hearing this, her brother bounced forward.

"\_My turn!"\_ he chimed excitedly, and threw herself into the water without hesitation, splashing water to the rest of his family. But he didn't notice that at all, as he began to hop in and out of the water chasing the flock of fish in circles. The lack of success seemingly made him even more ardent, and he continuously bounced around in the shallow pond in his fierce hunt.

His sister only frowned at the sight.

"\_Umm...\_"

"\_Well, this is how one should \_\_\*\*not\*\*\_\_ try to fish."\_ her father commented. Her mother chuckled and then she expressed her opinion as well:

"\_He's a bit too jumpy to try it the usual way, let him waste some of his energy first. Eventually, he will figure out that something's not right."\_

All three of them giggled at the male hatchling's flailing, until he slowly stopped, and shot a questioning glare at them.

"\_Daddy?"\_

"\_Yes?"\_

"\_These stupid fish don't let me catch them!" \_he said, now wearing a puzzled expression.

"\_Come over here and let me show you again." \_his father grinned at him.

Laranys giggled and shook her head as she watched her brother sadly wading through the pond. Suddenly, an unnaturally thick fog began to blur the surroundings. The quick transition scared her; she jumped to all fours, and cried out:

"\_Daddy, what's this?!"\_

Her father looked like he didn't hear her. He sat there motionlessly, eyes fixed on his son. Meanwhile, the fog thickened, and began to darken everything.

"\_Mommy?"\_

In the matter of mere seconds, she was completely alone in the darkness. Tears started to roll down on her face, and she cried out in a shaky tone:

"\_Mommy? Daddy? Where are you?" \_Her voice echoed emptily in the void.

A blunt, barely audible voice responded:

"\_Nyssie!"\_

"\_Daddy?"\_

"\_Nyssie!"\_

Completely in shock, she collapsed and began to sob.

"\_Please don't leave me alone..."\_

"\_Please..."\_

\* \* \*

><p>"<em>Nyssie!"<em>

"\_N-no... please..."\_

"\_Laranys, wake up!"\_

Her eyes snapped open, and for a few moments, she had no idea where she is. She panted as if she would have run for hours without stop, her throat was husky, her heart hammered inside her chest as if it would want to burst out and just fly away.

"\_Nyssie, are you alright?"\_ Volkownyr asked, taking a concerned look at her.

"\_Yeah, I'm... I'm fine."\_ she finally managed. She shook her head in an effort to clear it a bit, then as she slowly sat up, she realized

that her face was wet. With a few quick swipes of a forepaw, she rubbed her tears off.

Volk was still looking at her with full of concern.

"\_You looked like you were having a bad dream...\_"

"\_I was.\_" she confirmed with a sad sigh. Then she took a look around to examine her surroundings.

The last few days brought significant changes. More and more dragons of various kinds were crammed next to them, and they all told things Larany's thought would be impossible.

They proved to be in possession of a good amount of knowledge regarding humans. They told that humans only realized the existence of dragons roughly twenty winters ago. Prior to that, they thought that dragons were a myth, creatures of legends. This alone confused Larany's and Volk, but the things that came after it were above their boundaries of imagination.

The relationship between humans and dragons were generally peaceful for most of the time. Of course, it sometimes happened that hungry dragons in the wilderness ate a human or two, or humans shot down a dragon or two, but the majority of the humans approached the scaly creatures in a friendly way, and soon, the dragons responded as such. Many dragons agreed to, or even chose to live together with humans, establishing family-like bonds and friendships. The dragons were marvelled by the ingenuity of the bipedal, hairless mammals, whose inventions made everyone's life easier and more comfortable. On the other hand, humans willingly shared their food and homes with the curious dragons, who naturally responded kindness and care with the same. This began a huge migration, as lots of dragons decided to give up their old way of life which contained a lot more struggle for survival. Of course, a huge amount of dragons just decided to stay out of this, while lots of them didn't even know what happened.

The latter was generally true for the Night Furies, who were not only one of the rarest breeds of dragons, but they mostly lived in secluded places. Furies were a rare sight in human cities, but it did happen occasionally. Some dragons even began to work together with humans, becoming official and appreciated members of their society.

But during the last spring, strange things began to happen. Flocks of humans began to openly protest against the boundaries of their society, and from what Larany's heard; they weren't friendly to dragons at all. The protests quickly escalated into violent confrontations, with many deaths on either side. After that, it didn't take too long for the humans to bring out their big weapons and begin to kill each other by the thousands.

And what's even worse, those humans who wanted their "change", began to chase away, kill or capture any dragon they could find. The plane which carried Nyssie and Volk stopped at least half a dozen times, loading in more and more dragons. The way they kept them inside has also changed: previously, when there was only Nyssie, Volk and Rak, they were all in a big cage, which at least allowed a few paces of movement. Now, all of them were in tiny, separate cages, with wings kept folded by tight and heavy chains. Their fore-, and

hind legs were also chained together, and the chain was connected with another one, permitting them from running or jumping, too. Not that they had and room to do so, their new cages were barely big enough to sit comfortably. T'Arakhniz was in the worst position: his cage was so small, he wasn't even allowed to curl up into a sleeping position, all he could do is sit and lean towards a side.

The many dragons which were brought in later were all different. Six Terrible Terrors were crammed into a cage, and in addition to being understandably restless, they were constantly babbling and asking questions at the speed of wind. Laranys would have found them annoying if she didn't pity them for their misery.

In another cage, there were a complete family of Deadly Nadders, father, mother, and five hatchlings. The parents did an admirable job at keeping their young in check, and Laranys found the size of their family very interesting. So far, he thought that having a sibling with the same age is a rare thing, and it was true for her kind. Now, she saw five hatchlings from the same clutch, and upon her question, the female Nadder described that having five hatchlings are completely natural for them. All dragon kinds have different birth-rates, ranging from dozens of eggs to a single one. During their talk, Laranys also concluded that the more offspring a specie has, the shorter their average lifespan is. She learned that Terrors for example, who can lay clutches of twelve or even more, only live a few decades, in comparison to Night Furies, who mostly have only one egg at a time, but they live for several hundred years.

Under ideal circumstances of course, currently she wasn't convinced that she'll be allowed reach that age. Food was even scarcer, despite the steady growth of dragon presence. Laranys herself discovered shockingly that she's growing thinner, since her capture two weeks ago. The fully grown Nadders were starting to show their ribs, as they gave all the food to their hatchlings.

Even the two Gronckles on the far side of the cargo compartment looked thinner, but it was hard to tell. They were very quiet, mostly sleeping and they rarely spoke even when they were awake. Laranys didn't know much about them, but she had a feeling that they were actually smarter than others would give them credit for.

There was also a Monstrous Nightmare inside the plane too, but as far as Nyssie could tell he looked very sick. He described that he's able to set his whole body on fire, because his scales are coated with the same oily material he uses to produce fire. But it looks like the poison the humans feeding them to prevent them from breathing fire is wrecking havoc inside him, making him generally feel weak, and visibly drying out his scales. In addition to that, his wings and legs were also tied up tightly; the only movement he could make is crawling on the floor, using his hind legs to push himself forward.

It mesmerised Laranys that almost all dragons treated her and Volk with some amount of respect. As if they would be special in a way. The only one, who was hostile towards them, was a young Skrill, who was picked up a couple of days ago. He constantly swore and threatened them, until Volkownyr used his tail sweep a pile of waste into his face. After the flying portion of faeces splattered on his forehead, the Skrill became silent, and he had to suffice with shooting hateful glares at them occasionally.

Nobody had any clue about where the humans are taking them, but Larany's was afraid that if the humans are treating them like this on the way, what kind of treatment they can expect once they arrive at their destination?

At the moment she reached this thought, she noticed that the humming of the engines could not be heard.

"\_Looks like we stopped again.\_"

"\_Yeah.\_" Volk confirmed "You were still asleep when they shut off the engines."

One moment later, the cargo bay doors began to slowly open. Once the loading ramp was fixed in its lowered position, humans began to rush into the plane. The Skrill instinctively tried to shoot a ray of fire at them, but he only managed to barf up some green goo. Then, he started to roar at them, straining against the cage walls, but the more he growled, the more hits he earned to his head by the stick-carrying humans, so eventually he became silent and lowered himself to the floor.

The rest of the dragons were smarter than that, they all waited motionlessly, except for the Nadder family, where the parents tried to cover their youth with their wings.

One after another, the humans began to move the cages out of the plane.

"\_Do you think we have arrived?"\_ Larany's whispered to Volk.

"\_Maybe... But it would be nice to know- OW!"\_ he was stabbed in the side with a stick, and the human growled something at him in his strange language.

"\_YOU SON OF A-\_"

"\_Volk, DON'T-!"\_ Larany's cried out.

As the Night Fury roared at him, the human reached for his belt, grabbed a stun pistol and pointed it at Volk's neck. Two tiny metal probes, connected to the gun with wires, shot out from the barrel and penetrated the scales of the Night Fury. After a ten second treatment of two hundred and fifty kilovolts of electricity, Volkownyr dropped to the cage floor unconscious, muscles still twitching uncontrollably.

Larany's was horrified, but then the human turned towards her, and growled something which sounded like a question. All she dared to do, is cower, and trying to make herself look as tiny and unthreatening as she could. The human left her at that, and the others continued the unloading procedure. They used hand trucks to move the cages a few hundred steps away, then they began to load the cages up to another mean of transportation, a train, as Larany's heard.

As the sun slowly settled behind the horizon and the first stars began to appear on the chilly winter evening, Larany's silently watching the landscape pass. The constant shaking and knocking of the

train, and more importantly, her fear about tomorrow held her back from falling asleep. The cages of others were too far away to talk, and Volkownyr was still unconscious, so all she could do is whisper the question which occupied the minds of the rest of the dragons:

"\_Will we be alive to see the morning?"\_

\* \* \*

><p>With one last, strong yank, the train came to a halt.</p>

"\_Volk! Volk, you have to wake up!"\_ Laranys urged desperately.

"\_Nnngh..."\_

"\_Volkownyr, please!"\_

"\_I'm up..."\_ Volk groaned, and struggled onto fours. \_"W-where are we?"\_

"\_I think..."\_ her ears flattened to her head as she felt the icy touch of fear running along her spine \_"We have arrived."\_

Eye-hurting spotlights tore the night apart, and they were forced to squint as they tried to examine their surroundings. Without the words and phrases they learned from the other dragons, Nyssie and Volk would have no way to describe and understand what they saw. Not that having an idea of what awaits them would offer any comfort.

They saw lots of people around the tracks, walking up and down, preparing the cages for offloading. Another handful of humans were waiting in their white medical gowns, with lots of soldiers patrolling and keeping the area secure. The spotlights were on watchtowers with more guards overlooking the area. Not far from the train station, they saw a tall, concrete fence, which more resembled a wall, and there were spikes and barbed wire on top of it. The area around the train station was hilly, and the two Night Furies slowly realized that the fenced area is right in front of a mountain.

"\_Do you think they want to lock us into the mountain?"\_ Nyssie asked in a low voice.

"\_I can imagine anything from these bastards."\_ Volk growled.

Just as he finished his sentence, the gown-wearing humans began to approach their cages, with soldiers behind them, urging them forward. Laranys cowered to the farther side of the cage, but a few of the soldiers grabbed her chains, and forcefully pulled her against the grid. Laranys whined as she was stuck into this uncomfortable, immobilized position, and she could hear Volkownyr's struggling and growling coming from behind. She tilted her head a bit to see one of the guards looking at her.

"\_Please..."\_ she whined \_"What have we done?"\_

For a moment, she was sure she saw a sparkle of pity in the guard's eyes. But it only lasted for a moment, then another human yelled something in an orderly fashion, and the guard stepped behind. Larany's faintly sensed that someone stepped over to her, then she felt a slight sting, and a weak but strengthening pressure on her neck, as one of the gown-wearers injected the mild sedative into her system.

A few moments after that, she felt her chains becoming slightly looser, but her head became heavy and her muscles refused to obey her will anymore. She helplessly collapsed to the floor.

Minutes passed, and the world reduced itself into a blurry mess of dark colours and obscure shapes. She tried to shake her head in an effort to get things clearer, but all she was able to, was a languid nod. After her cage was lifted off from the flat wagon, she barely realized that they opened her cage. For a desperate moment, the thought of escape crossed her mind, but she couldn't breathe fire, she couldn't fly, jump, run or anything that would offer her a chance. She was so disoriented, she didn't even attempt to bite when two of the humans entered her cage, and strapped a leather belt around her head. She shockingly discovered with her delayed senses that now she can't even bite anymore, her jaw had only a very small amount of movement up and down.

She lay paralysed on the cage floor, and she could only vaguely make out the desperate groans of the other dragons. More humans came, and they grabbed her chains, pulling her towards a direction. Using their pull, Larany's was able to slowly stand up again, and seeing that she has no choice, she obediently followed the humans. Weighted down by the heavy chain, and being half-conscious by the sedative, her steps were shaky and unsure.

After a few minutes of dragging and walking, her foggy mind registered that she went through two gates, a courtyard, and she was dragged into a smaller room. Then, much to her dismay, the floor started to shake, and the whole room began to go downwards.

After around a minute of travelling, she and her captors finally entered a dark hall. She was dragged into a corner, and finally left alone.

She couldn't find the strength or will inside of her to take a look around, so she collapsed to her side, and let the exhaustion overtake her.

\_Laranys?! By the Spirits, is that really you?\_

The voice was feminine, shocked, but honestly caring at the same time. It reminded Larany's of her mother's, but it was slightly different. She hesitantly opened her eyes, and slowly lifted her head. She was still squeamish by the sedative, exhausted by the long trip and weak from the lack of food. As she set her eyes on the dragoness calling her, a name slowly crawled into her mind.

"\_Aelynna?"\_ she mumbled \_"What... what are you doing here?"\_

"\_I was on my way back to home when the humans attacked me and knocked me out of the with a flying net..." \_she told to her \_"I've

"\_spent days inside the humans' flying and rolling contraptions, until they dumped me here two nights ago...\_"

"\_So... others have been captured as well?"\_ Larany asked, being afraid of the answer.

Aelynna gulped, before beginning to answer.

"\_I was brought here along two from our clan, Orlengiir and Bernarth. Bernie's here somewhere too, but Orlen... he was seriously injured when they caught him... so...\_"

"\_You mean, he couldn't make it to here?"\_ Nyssie asked.

Aelynna shook her head ruefully. "\_Have you been captured alone?"\_

"\_I met with Volkownyr. He should be somewhere near..."\_ Larany looked around, but much to her surprise, there were dozens of dragons laying or sitting around, talking quietly.

"\_Bernarth is at the other side of this cave, we always check the newcomers every day. I'm sure he will find Volkownyr, and the four of us can meet up-\_

She was interrupted by a harsh, grouchy voice.

"\_All right newcomers, listen up!"\_ The voice belonged to an old-looking Gronckle. He looked impressive in size compared to the Gronckles Larany saw earlier, but his scales were unhealthily pale and dusty; his numerous scars around his face and missing right eye gave him a rather battered appearance. He wore the same chains as the rest of the dragons, but his voice was still authoritative.

"\_Welcome to this ugly shithole of the world, we call it The Pit. None of us knows why we are here, but our dear human hosts have other humans down here, living in the same conditions as we are, doing what we do. In one hour, the horn will mark the beginning of the day, and the guards will come to take us to our workplaces. Because we have been brought here to do forced labour for these bastards. That's right, we play pit ponies, and carry weight. Those who wish to stay alive, better do as told, because the humans kill in seconds.\_"

"\_Just... what?"\_ Larany whispered in despair.

"\_He's speaking the truth.\_" Aelynna sighed sadly. "\_We all are doing heavy work here, for most of the day. They give us a short time to eat something midday, then we have to work until sleep time. We get fed before it, but that's all. What the captive humans dig out, we have to carry it to certain places, rinse and repeat. Over and over again.\_"

"\_I'm not doin' this shitty job for ya!"\_ the young Skrill cried out loud.

"\_By the Spirits, not another one of those..."\_ Aelynna let out a resigned sigh again.

The Gronckle shot a killing glare at the Skrill, and he backtracked at least two steps in response.

"\_You can do whatever you want, if you want to die horribly, be my guest. But if I see that your foolish actions will bring harm to others, I will personally tear out your throat. Those who do not produce the daily standard will get punished, along with the rest of the group. We are all sorted into groups here, and if one member of the group breaks the regulations, the whole group receives punishment. Do not attempt to bite, growl, or disobey and order under any circumstance.\_"

As if to reinforce the old Gronckle's words, a loud horn sounded and all of the dragons began to form a group of some sort. Laranys quietly followed Aelynna and occupied a place next to her. Much to her fright, humans began to appear from the caverns and corridors, but they all wore torn and dirty clothes, and most of them looked just as miserable as the old Gronckle.

The captive humans also formed lines, and everyone was just finished when the doors of the elevator opened, and a contingent of armed soldiers marched in, led by a tall man who wore a long leather jacket, and a black service cap.

The old Gronckle stepped out of the line and approached him. The officer grunted a few unfriendly words to him, then both turned towards the crowd of dragons and prisoners.

"\_He also acts as a translator; he learned the human language quite well.\_" Aelynna explained quietly.

"\_How-\_"

The Gronckle's grouchy voice interrupted her. He shut his eyes and frowned, making it obvious that he loathes every word he has to say.

"\_By the endless wisdom of the Prophet, you have been selected to work here for the greater good. This way, you can keep your worthless lives, even if you do not deserve them.\_"

"\_WHERE'S MY FAMILY?!\_" a Nadder roared and tumbled forward. Laranys was shocked when she realized that this is the male Nadder who was brought along with her, his mate and hatchlings.

The black-wearing man pulled out a long stick which dangerously sparkled at on end, and hit the Nadder in the face with a long swing. The Nadder let out a roar of pain as he fell to his side.

"\_S-speak only when you are allowed to.\_" the Gronckle stuttered as he translated the officer's words, looking away from the Nadder.

"\_YOU SON OF A HAIRLESS APE, WHERE IS-\_"

Without a word, the officer put away his shockstick and pulled out his gun. He pointed it at the roaring Deadly Nadder's forehead, and pulled the trigger.

The loud bang echoed through the mine, the rock walls repeating the

sound again and again, until it died away slowly.

The Nadder lay motionless on the ground, in a continuously growing pool of blood.

Laranys stood at her place in utter horror. The officer continued his speech, but she didn't even hear it, she was unable to tear her glare away from the dead dragon. She had no idea that after the two weeks of being dragging all over the world with unbearable amounts of sadism, things could get any worse.

She was wrong. The nightmare only began.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>AN And that's all for this chapter. I'll be coming back with more!\*\*

\*\*As always, if you found something you like, dislike, or don't understand, use this box thingy here down below:  
; )\*\*

\*\*I\*\*

\*\*I\*\*

\*\*I\*\*

\*\*V\*\*

## 20. Scattered by the Storm - Chapter 9

Chapter 9.

"\_I don't want any night patrols tonight. We've been here long enough, I want the whole clan to get a move on tomorrow evening, and I want everyone to be as rested as possible. Have the Guards spread out on the edges of the island, and keep on the lookout while staying on the ground. Tell everyone to return at sunset, tomorrow, then we'll get into formation and continue northeast.\_"

First Guard Salkonyr heard out Lenhardt's plan, and nodded approvingly.

"\_A sound strategy. This two-day rest we had was nice, but I agree that we should not overstay our welcome here. Human-populated areas are a lot closer than I'd like. I'll go and relay your orders.\_"

"\_Please do.\_" Lenny sighed tiredly, and sat down on his haunches as he watched the older dragon hop into the air. Looking up at the late-evening sky, he saw the myriad of stars, and the sight began to relax his tense mind. Stargazing was always one of his favourite things to do; the endless amount of stars sitting quietly on the vast reaches of the sky had a strangely soothing effect on him.

His musing was interrupted by the sound of flapping wings near him. He turned his head to see his mother touching town softly and walking up to nuzzle him.

"\_Already back from fishing?"\_ Lenny asked.

"\_The catch is plenty, so I decided to go on a second round today."\_ Lyara explained \_"I think piling up some reserves would be beneficial if we want to eat before we go tomorrow."\_

"\_Good idea."\_ Lenny commented "\_I haven't thought about that."\_ Suddenly, his voice began to sound defensive\_"I came back from hunting a while ago, then I had to sort out Guard duty with Salko. He just left a minute ago..."\_ he stopped to take a deep breath and let out a weary sigh \_"I feel like I could sleep until tomorrow evening."\_

Lyara took a serious look at her son.

"\_You know you really don't have to do everything alone."\_

After a few moments of silence, he hesitantly murmured:

"\_Dad does it, too."\_

"\_Lenny. No matter how much you look like him, you are not your father and no one is expecting you to be."\_ Lyara stated \_"Asking for help is never a shame, because it's proof that you have the wisdom to face and understand your own limitations. Overestimating yourself and committing mistakes which would have been easily avoidable if you'd rely on help, is not something you should do."\_

A curvy smile appeared on Lenny's face, as he tilted his head and said:

"\_This sounded totally like one of dad's usual wisecracks."\_

"\_When you spend a few decades with someone, you'll definitely pick up some of their habits over time."\_ Lyara chuckled, and extended a wing over her son's back to hug him.

"\_I guess so."\_ Lenny mumbled with eyes closed. \_"I know you're right, I'll try to rely on you more in the future."\_

"\_You'll say everything I want to hear if I'll leave you be, won't you?"\_

"\_No!"\_ Lenny protested, then as he saw his mother's doubtful smile, a tired grin appeared on his face \_"I mean... I usually do, but I'm serious this time."\_

"\_Alright.\_" \_Lyara licked his face\_ "I'll get back to fishing."\_

\_And I'll get some... shuteye.\_ Lenhardt yawned and fell to his side right where he sat. \_"G'night Mom."\_

\_Good night, Lenny.\_ Lyara whispered, and took off, heading towards the spot where she fished earlier.

Lenhardt closed his eyes and stirred himself into a comfortable position, tailfins covering his eyes.

\* \* \*

><p>He felt like only seconds passed since he laid down, when he heard someone calling his name.</p>

"\_Lenhardt! Lenhardt Valdr!"\_

"\_Nnngh..."\_ he moaned in irritation.

"\_I'm sorry to wake you up but you must see this!"\_

The urgent tone snapped Lenny's eyes open, and he sat up to face the Guard in front of him. He recognized Garenald clawing the ground in anxiety, a worrisome look on his face.

"\_Okay, lead the way."\_ Lenhardt groaned, voice still drowsy from the sudden wakeup. Judging from the Guard's behaviour, the situation seemed urgent, so he thought it's better to ask questions mid-air. He looked up to the sky, and only saw a few stars which weren't hidden by the clouds. A minute later, when both of them were airborne, heading south, Garen began to explain the situation without questions.

"\_There is a human settlement just a few minutes of flight from the tip of the island, as the river goes."\_

"\_Yeah, I remember. Unusual activity?"\_ the younger Fury asked.

"\_I guess you can say that." \_the Guard answered darkly. A few moments later as the southern horizon became visible, the sight made him drop his jaw.

The area of the human settlement was engulfed in flames.

The two dragons touched down at the riverbed, they had a clear view of the scene in front of them.

"\_There were no explosions, or any loud sounds that would indicate any fighting going on. A short while ago, those little self-built caves they live in began to go up in flames."\_ Garenald described.

Lenhardt took a sharp breath as he turned his head toward the older dragon.

"\_Go back to the others and alert Salkonyr. I want him and three other Guards to check the area around."\_ he ordered \_"There's no guarantee that those who did this aren't heading towards here, I want to be sure there's no danger."\_

"\_Understood."\_ Garenald nodded \_"What about you?"\_

"\_I'll go and scout ahead until you come back."\_ Lenhardt murmured, gazing into the flames.

"\_I'm not sure this is-\_"

"\_I won't take any risks, Garen.\_" Lenny interrupted the other dragon's protest. \_"At the slightest impression of any danger, I'll pull back. But I want to find out what the heck is going on

here."—

Garenald stared into his eyes for a few moments, then he wordlessly raised his wings and leapt into the air, heading back to the clan.

Lenhardt also didn't waste any time, he took off and began to approach the human settlement. He flew up high and did a circle around the settlement, sharpening every sense he had for any danger. But no shots or even cries came, the area seemed completely abandoned. He swallowed, and carefully began to descend towards a clearing between the human-made caves until his paws met the hard, unusual ground. A wide variety of scents hit his nostrils as the whole place around him was slowly getting consumed by the flames, but much to his surprise, he couldn't smell burnt flesh, blood, or death.

He slowly began to walk forward, examining his surroundings carefully. From above, the layout of the place resembled to a spider's web: the strange, gray ground he was walking on stretched forwards and backwards, shorter and longer sections branched into it, but rarely seemed to take a turn. He could only compare the gray ground to a path in the forest, except that a path was natural, made by the various animals roaming the forest, while this seemed entirely human-made. Why would the bi-pedals think that walking on this is more comfortable than...

His thinking was interrupted by a desperate scream coming from one of the angular caves not far from him.

With three long jumps, he was at what looked like the entrance, but then he stopped. What if this is just a trap? What if there are murderers hiding inside, wanting to lure him in and capture or kill him too? Or what if someone's in real danger inside? Should he attempt a rescue at all? So far, the humans only caused pain and suffering to him and his whole clan, does this one deserve to live?

Suddenly, an old memory flashed into his mind; a memory of his father telling a tale about how he met a lost Skrill hatchling, and how he carried him back to his nomadic clan despite that he risked his own life by doing so. Back then, Lenhardt was completely baffled by the story. He asked his father why he risked his life for a Skrill, despite that their kind had caused so much sorrow for the Furies? He clearly remembered the amused smile of his father after he questioned him, and he remembered the lecture which came after it, too:

"\_Son, we Night Furies and the Skrills are mortal enemies of each other. Is it good that way? Of course not. Who knows, what I did might be the first step on the long road of coming to terms with each other, learning to acknowledge and respect the other's existence. Besides that, I am sure that the hatchling wasn't the one who fought against our clan years ago, and nobody should blame one being for an entire community's crimes.\_"

Now Lenhardt knew what he has to do.

He slammed his paws against the wooden entrance a couple of times, then took a few steps back, and jumped against it, adding all of his weight and strength to the impact. That did the job, the rectangular

piece of wood broke out from its place and fell to the floor. Entering the cave, he quickly found out who was crying.

Amidst the various objects inside with various shapes, sizes and unknown use, he saw a small human crouching under a thing which had four wooden legs and a flat surface. Unlike the fighting-humans he already saw, this one seemed a lot smaller, and it did not hide its face like the others. Its most unique feature was the relatively long fur coming down from its head. Its large, round eyes and overall small dimensions gave Lenhardt the idea that he's probably seeing a human hatchling.

He quickly ran over the tiny thing.

"\_Come on, we have to get outta here!"\_ He urged, but the hatchling only shot a terrified and confused glare at him from under its cover. In the meantime, the dangerous groaning and cracks coming from above warned Lenny, that maybe their getaway would be quite timely.

"\_Oh come on..."\_ the young Night Fury tucked his nose under the wooden cover, then the little human jumped forward, wrapping its limbs around Lenny's neck. As he raised his head, the hatchling clung to him desperately.

"\_Alright, this works, too."\_ Lenny moaned, and rushed towards the entrance. The room began to fill with smoke, and he heard parts of the ceiling coming down as well. He zigzagged and jumped, a girder barely missing them as they got out from the human-cave.

He ran a couple of paces before slowing down, allowing the tiny human to release his neck and stand on its hind legs. They both turned back towards the cave in flames, and both let out a startled cry as the whole thing collapsed.

"\_Now that was a bit too close for comfort."\_ Lenny commented, and looked at the human beside him. He saw tears rolling down the cheeks of the hatchling, which took him by surprise.

"\_Okay, so humans can cry too? You aren't exactly like the bloodthirsty savages I met earlier..."\_

Upon hearing the dragon's comments, the young human turned towards him, and raised a foreleg.

"\_Hey, wait, what do you want?"\_ Lenny asked quickly, and tried to lean away from the touch. But as he took a closer look, the little human's paws looked completely unthreatening with those stubby little paw toes which didn't even seem to have claws. He stopped, and let the human reach him.

It touched his snout, and began to gently rub his nose. The touch was surprisingly soft, and Lenny found himself purring involuntarily by the pleasant feeling.

"\_Okay, now it's my turn."\_ he said to the little human, and leaned forward to thoroughly sniff it around. He smelled its upper body and around its neck, luring out a sound from it which must have been the human way of chuckling. Lenny found the human's scent interesting; he managed to distinguish traces of smoke, a completely unknown odour, and something which smelled slightly... feminine.

"\_Wait, you're a girl, aren't you?" he asked, still hoping if the little human can understand him somehow. But she just giggled again and began to scratch a spot behind his ears, sending tiny bolts of pleasure running down his spine.

"\_Alright, unless you protest, you'll be a girl." he purred "Now we just have to figure out-"

"\_LENHARDT!"

Both the dragon and the little girl jumped at the angry roar. Lenny looked up to see Salkonyr, Garenald and Raylandt coming down at him quickly.

"\_We need to talk about what you mean by 'won't taking any risks'." the First Guard began, then he noticed the little girl trying to hide under Lenny's right wing "\_By the holy fires of Wotahn, what is that thing?!"

"\_I found this human hatchling in one of the burning caves!" Lenhardt explained quickly "\_She was completely alone and helpless, I had to get her out to safety!"

"\_You risked your own life to save a \_\_\*\*human\*\*\_\_?" Salkonyr asked in disbelief.

"\_What, I should've let her die instead?!" Lenny retorted.

Salkonyr shut his eyes and took a deep breath in an effort to swallow down what he was just about to say. After a few moments, he spoke up in a calmer tone:

"\_This place is not safe, we have to get out of here."\_ He took a suspicious look at the younger Night Fury "\_I hope you're not considering-"

"\_No, I'm done with that."\_ Lenhardt said firmly. "\_She's coming back with us, until I decide what to do with her."

The three Guards exchanged a meaningful look, and took off one by one. Meanwhile, Lenny lifted his wing off the small human, and looked into her eyes.

"\_I'm smaller than them, so I think you could safely get onto my back and hang on."\_ he tried to explain, but he only got a questioning glare in response. After some gentle nudging and showing his nape towards the girl, she finally understood, and carefully moved herself into a sitting position slightly ahead of the dragon's wing-shoulders, leaning on his neck in a tight but not choking embrace.

"\_Don't worry, I'll be careful."\_ he tried to comfort her a bit, then opened his wings and leaped into the air. The girl on his back let out a startled cry as they launched forward, but as they began to gain some distance from the settlement, Lenny felt her grip gradually relaxing on his neck.

On their way back, he carefully tilted his head to see the girl looking at the landscape around them with a joyous expression on her

face. The sight made Lenhardt smile, too:

"\_You're a weird little thing, I hope you know that."\_

\* \* \*

><p>As expected, the majority of Clan Toemnir wasn't exactly thrilled by the presence of the young human girl, but after Lenhardt convinced everyone that the youngling is completely harmless, they reluctantly returned to their duties and refrained from further complaining. Lenny took his little companion to a clearing around the centre of the island, and lit up a small fire for her from fallen twigs and small branches. He even gave a fish from the pile the hunters collected as a reserve for tomorrow, then shifted his attention to Salkonyr, who let out quite a few irritated growls since they returned from the human settlement.</p>

"\_I really hope you aren't planning to drag her along with us."\_ he commented.

"\_No, of course not.\_ Lenny shook his head \_"I'd like to ask you to organize a smaller patrol and sweep the forest area around the human-caves. Those caves were deserted, which means there are two possible explanations."\_

"\_Do you suspect they are hiding somewhere?" \_Salkonyr asked.

"\_It's either that, or they've been taken away. Like..."\_

"\_I get it.\_" Salko murmured.

"\_Yeah.\_" Lenny sighed \_"I'd like to believe in the former.\_"

"\_Alright, I'll try to round up a few humans for you...\_ the First Guard began, than noticed the girl's up to something \_"Hey, what is she doing?"\_

They both looked at the young human, who impaled the fish she got from Lenhardt to a stick, and hung it over the fire. She noticed the two dragons glaring at her, and questioningly warbled something on her own strange language.

"\_I have no clue...\_ Lenhardt said slowly, then turned his attention back to Salkonyr, who was still examining the human's actions.

"\_So if you find the cave-dwellers, I'll fly the girl back to them. Hopefully she'll find her family there, and this whole thing will end to everyone's satisfaction.\_"

"\_Right.\_" Salkonyr replied. \_"I'll come back when I found something.\_"

"\_Take care.\_" Lenny said.

"\_As always.\_"

Salkonyr took off and disappeared into the night sky, so the young Night Fury could continue watching the girl. By his estimation, the girl was a little smaller than half the height of the humans who

attacked Toemnir valley. He had no idea how old she can be, and he really wished if he could find a way to communicate with her somehow. He could ask so many questions from her...

At some point, the girl decided that she burned the fish enough, and began to chew down on it.

"\_So you don't like raw things, huh?"\_ Lenny asked from her. She seemed to enjoy the fish; she must've been quite hungry before. As the girl finished her meal, she wiped her mouth with the colourful second skin she wore, and raised her foreleg to caress the Night Fury's forehead. Once again, the softness of the touch marvelled Lenhardt.

"\_How is that some of your kind are so hostile but you happen to be so kind?"\_ Lenny whispered to her. The girl mumbled something in response, then snuggled up to his side. Lenny raised a wing to cover her from the cool winter night, which she seemed to take very gratefully.

"\_There are just so many things we don't know about you."\_ Lenny continued his thinking out loud \_"Your kind does everything in its own way, and I'd like to understand why and how. I'm not convinced that we have to hate each other. But figuring out what's wrong should be the first step to set things right, don't you think?"\_

He looked at the girl again, and he noticed that her eyes are closed; her breathing slowed down, becoming orderly and calm.

"\_Sleeping instead of wondering about things you can't fix in the middle of the night?"\_ Lenny chuckled. \_"Maybe you're right."\_

A few moments later, his earplates twitched as he heard someone coming towards them. He turned his head towards the source of the rustling, and recognized Melyan walking towards them.

"\_Grandma!"\_

"\_There you are!"\_ she smiled warmly at him \_"I've been searching high and low for you."\_ She stopped, peeked under his wing and added: \_"And your little protÃ©gÃ©."\_

"\_Grandma, please!"\_ Lenny sighed \_"I've had enough berating for today, please have mercy on me!"\_

Melyan stopped, and took a long look at him. Lenhardt's ears flattened on his head, and a guilty smile appeared on his face.

"\_Sorry."\_

"\_Lenny."\_ Melyan began slowly, after sitting down next to his grandson, her tail curling around her legs \_"I wanted to say I'm proud of you for making the right decision."\_

The young Fury's jaw dropped.

"\_Oh... really?"\_

"\_Why, is it surprising?"\_ Melyan asked back, shooting a curious glance at him.

Lenny gulped.

"\_Umm... no. I mean... I thought that you... you may not exactly like humans because... well..."\_

"\_Because of what happened to your grandfather?" \_she asked calmly.

Lenny examined his grandmother's expression for a moment before answering. Her tone might have been calm, but he couldn't miss the hurtful flash in her eyes which occurred every time Wordren was mentioned. Lenny talked with her many times since they left their home, and he knew how sad and lonely Melyan had become after the events in Toemnir valley. He had not expected her to accept a human's presence around the clan easily, but her opinion seemed to be different.

"\_Lenny."\_ Melyan sighed \_"As far as I know, this youngling has nothing to do with what happened to us. Therefore, she does not deserve any kind of negative treatment; she can't answer for actions she never committed."\_

"\_I'm glad you see it that way, too."\_ Lenny let out a huff of relief  
\_"Most of the others aren't so understanding, I fear."\_

"\_You can't blame them."\_ Melyan replied \_"When our loved ones are hurt, the first instinctual reaction we have is the thirst for vengeance. Lots of families have been torn apart on that day, there isn't a single Fury here who hasn't lost a close friend or a relative. The pain is still fresh, and many dragons think that you're rubbing salt to the wound by bringing a human here."\_

"\_B-but..."\_

"\_But" \_she continued, placing a wing on Lenny's back \_"that is generalization, which is wrong. No hatchling can be held responsible for the sins of their parents. She is just as innocent as you are. And do you know what I would do if I could meet the ones who killed my mate?"\_

Lenny shook his head silently.

"\_I would ask them, why."\_ Melyan whispered. \_"Killing them won't bring Wordren or anyone else back. But if I could understand the reasons, it might help me to accept what happened. The others will reach this conclusion as well, just give them some time."\_

"\_I thought of something similar when I crashed inside that cave to save her."\_ Lenny said, looking at the young girl beside him. She was awake, and curiously watched the older dragoness who wasn't there when she fell asleep.

"\_Oh my, you're so cute."\_ Melyan purred at her, and leaned over to sniff her. The girl let out a friendly warble again, and raised her foreleg to touch the face of the dragoness.

"\_Anyway"\_ she said after pulling back from the human \_"You did exactly what your father would've done. Your mother said this too, we met for a brief moment while I was searching for you."\_

A proud smile appeared on Lenny's face.

"\_That feels good to hear. Thanks, Grandma.\_"

"\_Don't mention it.\_" she purred and nuzzled the young dragon's face. The little girl between them watched excitedly, and cried out something.

"\_Y'know, those funny noises you make are cool, but I'd prefer something more understandable.\_" Lenny chuckled while looking at the girl.

"\_I'm thinking about giving her a name, addressing her as 'human' all the time seems a bit rude for me.\_" he said, turning back towards Melyan.

"\_You kind of have a point...\_" Melyan answered thoughtfully.

"\_How about... Clawless?\_"

The dragoness burst out of laughter.

"\_That's just so silly!\_"

"\_Well... yeah I know, but it fits her, she's the most harmless thing I've ever seen!\_" Lenny said defensively, then joined her laughter  
\_"And, the first time she raised her foreleg to touch me, I was like 'Where the heck are the claws on this thing?' and I just looked and looked...\_"

After a few more seconds of titter, Melyan calmed down enough to say:

"\_Alright, so Clawless she is.\_" she grinned.

"\_Yeah, you like it, girl?\_" Lenny smiled at her, and she mumbled something in response.

"\_I'll take it as a 'yes'. Not that we have a choice, anyway.\_" he laughed.

Just a few moments later, they heard someone calling the young dragon, and as they looked up, they saw Salkonyr coming down to meet them.

"\_Salko!\_" Lenny greeted him \_"That went fast!"\_

"\_It did.\_" the First Guard confirmed \_"We've found the humans we were looking for. They are just a few minutes of flight east of their settlement, and some of them went back to fight the flames. I guess they want to save what's left of their homes. Garenald spotted a column of armed humans with those rolling fighting things heading south. I suspect they were the ones lighting up the area in the first place. "\_

"\_So they are going away.\_" Lenny concluded. \_"That's good. You hear

that, Clawless?" he asked, looking at the girl again "You're going home!"

The little girl looked at him with wide eyes.

"We're gonna fly again!" Lenny tried, flapping his wings a few times.

Now that lured out an excited scream from Clawless.

\* \* \*

><p>A while later, as the early morning light began to soften the darkness; Lenhardt, Salkonyr and Melyan were above the forest, circling around the spot Salkonyr mentioned previously. As soon as Lenny managed to notice the humans pacing around, he sought out a clearing, and carefully spiralled down. The humans saw their approach, and just a few moments after the three dragons and the girl landed, there was a smaller crowd at the edge of the clearing.</p>

Salkonyr nervously clawed the ground as he took a look around.

"Now this is definitely unpleasant." he growled.

"Easy, Salko. They mean no harm." Lenny told to him.

"Uh-huh."

In the meantime, Clawless began to eye the crowd around them, then suddenly she screamed and hurried towards a tall human. The human let out what sounded like a cry of relief, and ran forward, hugging the girl and lifting her up.

"Aww." Melyan smiled at the sight, tilting her head to the side a bit.

"Great, can we go now?" Salkonyr asked with a hint of impatience in his voice.

"Salko!" Melyan chided "Don't ruin the moment!"

"Yeah, let's wait for a minute, I want to see the reaction." Lenhardt butted in, narrowing his eyes at the tall human holding the little girl.

Not releasing her from the hug, the man eventually turned towards them. He raised and shook a foreleg, which looked like a gesture of greeting, then loudly said:

"ДјДњ•Д, Д±Д¾."

"I think that should be something like 'thanks'." Melyan concluded.

"I agree." Lenny sighed "Okay, let's get out of here. We don't have much time before sunrise, and we still have to prepare for leaving this place tomorrow."

All three of them were in the air, heading west a bit to disappear from the eyes before heading straight towards their temporary home. Despite how hard he tried not to, Lenhardt found himself looking back a few times, wondering what will happen now to the young human girl. He learned quite a few things about humans, such as not all of them hate dragons, which was at least promising. Hopefully, today he made a friend, and hopefully they will remember what he did for them.

"\_What's wrong, Lenny?"\_ Melyan asked, noticing her grandson's distant expression, and flew a bit closer to him.

"\_Nothin'.\_" he murmured. \_"Now we should all focus on the journey ahead of us. We still have a long way to fly."\_-

\*\*End of Part Two\*\*

\* \* \*

><p><strong>AN: And with that, this current part stands concluded. But worry not, we aren't even halfway there, there's still lots of things to talk about. ;) So be prepared for the upcoming Part Three, the escalating conflict, more food for thinking, and generally, more fun!\*\*

\*\*As always, please ask/comment/review.\*\*

\*\*Until next time! o/\*\*

\*\*I\*\*

\*\*I\*\*

\*\*I\*\*

\*\*V\*\*

## 21. Path of Lies - Prologue

\*\*A/N: Before we begin, dear "ttt"! I'm happy that you decided to review, but please note that I can't really answer you if you don't have an account! :)\*\*

\* \* \*

><p>Part Three: Path of Lies<p>

### Prologue

\_December 11th, 2039. Camp Nest, Magneville area, 28 kilometres south-southeast of Cherbourg, Normandy.\_

Despite her earlier concerns, Daweryn had to admit that this time, High Command managed to find quite a nice place for them to rest. The camp was near a lake, with a large forest on the other side of the lake, and the sea was just half an hour of flight away. The 18th Special Recon arrived here a week ago, by now, everyone was settled in and used whatever means possible to fill all their free time. Active duty was performed in four-dragon rotations, so eight Furies

could always rest for a week. And rest they did, after almost four years of nearly uninterrupted frontline service, everyone loved the idea that now for a change, they don't have to do anything at all. Except for the four dragons on duty, but even their job was the occasional patrol and keeping an eye on the others, preventing any collateral damage during relaxation.

On her way to the main barracks which used to be a boarding house before the war, Daweryn spotted four Furies playing a slightly altered version of football with a few servicemen from the 11th Air Manoeuvre Brigade. The dragon team couldn't have a goalkeeper because all he would have to do is raise his wings and the whole goal is covered. In exchange, the Furies were allowed to use all legs and tail to play, but touching the soldiers was forbidden, the friendliest push coming from a four hundred kilo dragon could cause some serious injuries.

Daweryn stopped to watch the game for a few minutes, then continued her casual walk towards the barracks. Entering the main building, she went up the stairs to the first floor, then turned right to the end of the hallway. The last room's door was open; the sounds of soft thuds and merry whistling were audible from a distance. Reaching the doorway, Daweryn sat down and peeked into the room. She saw Walther showing his back to her as he stood at his bed, doubling up clothes and placing them into travel bag.

"\_Am I interrupting?"\_ she asked.

Walther looked at her, and gave a lenient smile.

"Of course not. What happened?"

"\_The usual. Julyran caught Lark and Kiddo stealing 'D' units of issue from the provisions storehouse."\_ Daweryn reported with a hint of boredom in her voice.

"Unit 'D'? The ones with the sardines in oil?"

"Yep."

"Oh that's great." Walther sighed "The welfare officer's going to tear his hair out. Or mine. We need to... where's Lohengrin, by the way?"

"\_That's the other thing I wanted to mention."\_ Daweryn said \_"The boss told me that he's off duty for this week, and he wants to go somewhere around the hills..."\_

"So he's off relaxing somewhere? That's not bad, he deserves it."

"\_Umm... without a doubt, yeah, but just recently the storage keeper said he's missing some..."\_

"Not again." Walther cried out, covering his face with his palms.

"\_Some alcohol.\_"

Walther took a sharp breath, then started to talk strictly.

"First things first. I'll speak with the welfare officer and assign those two sneak thieves for kitchen service. After carrying buckets of slop around for a week, they'll think twice before putting my arse on the line again."

"\_Rog'.\_ Daweryn nodded.

"Secondly... how much booze are we missing exactly?"

The Night Fury swallowed tensely before answering the question.

"\_Two hundred and forty litres of beer and twenty litres of brandy.\_"

"WHAT?!"

"\_Oh, and we're also missing approximately five square metres of camouflage net.\_"

"Well, that explains how the clever bastard got away with seven barrels of spirit but... Goodness gracious, when did he disappear?!" Walther asked desperately.

"\_Yesterday morning.\_"

"Holy sh- Okay." Walther sighed. "Who's on duty with you?"

"\_Julyran, Nel, and Spryt.\_"

"Round up the two thieves and take them to the welfare officer, by the time you get there I'll have their penalty arranged. After that, keep an eye out, while I get a jeep and go after Lohengrin. God help us all if the Military Police finds him first!"

"\_Got it!\_" Daweryn jump onto fours, and hurried towards the stairs.

In the meantime, Walther stepped to the phone and dialled a number.

"Hallo? Sergeant Delacroix? Yeah, I may have an explanation for the missing cans and alcohol... I need to speak with you in person. Okay, five minutes. Okay. No... But... Hey! Okay, in the mess hall in five minutes, alright? Thanks."

He put down the phone, and sighed in resignation.

\* \*  
\*

><p>"<em>Jules! "<em>

"\_No.\_"

"\_But...Jules!\_"

"\_No!\_"

"\_C'mon buddy, don't you have a heart?"\_

"\_Shut up, Lark." \_Julyran huffed, and nudged the other Night Fury to keep going forward.

"\_We're done for!"\_ Dieter whined.

"\_Shut up Kiddo, this is all your fault!" \_Lark scolded the younger dragon.

"\_What?! The whole idea was yours in the first place!"\_came the angry riposte.

"\_Both of you shut up!"\_ Penelope cut in, swishing her tail angrily.  
\_"Lark, you'll get what you deserve for stealing food again and refusing to understand that you're not funny all the time. Dieter, you'll get what you deserve for being stupid enough to believe this idiot."\_

"\_Someone, note my objection regarding that comment on my mental state!"\_ Lark chimed.

Julyran and Penelope just shook their heads, as they escorted the two guilty Furies towards the mess hall. As they turned left at a corner, they spotted Walther and the welfare officer waiting for them.

"\_Oh, kitchen duty?"\_ Lark asked hopefully, ears perking up \_"Sure as hell beats digging latrines..."\_

"There you are!" the welfare officer snapped angrily "Are these two the ones who broke into the depot?"

"\_They are."\_ Walther nodded \_"And they are very sorry for doing that."\_

"\_Hey, I didn't say that!"\_ Lark protested.

"\_But I agree." Dieter said.\_

"\_Aw, Kiddo, you're no fun."\_

Penelope, having enough of Lark's antics, stepped ahead of him, and slapped him on the nose with a forepaw. The Night Fury let out a pained yowl, and cowered down in front of her, rubbing his nose with both forelegs.

"What was that?" the welfare officer asked, giving a confused look at Walther.

"Erm... The flight lieutenant is dissatisfied with the behaviour of her subordinate." Walther explained, giving a warning glance at Penelope.

"Understandably." the officer frowned. "Do they understand me?"

"Every word you say." Walther confirmed.

"Good." the officer nodded "Follow me, you scaly thieves, now you'll

learn the beauties of food production!"

"\_Why does this sound terrible?"\_ Dieter whined as he and Lark followed the officer inside the building. Nel, Jules and Walther remained outside. The human crossed his arms and gave an expecting look at the spot where the dragons disappeared.

"Wait for it... wait for it..."

In all of a sudden, a desperate cry boomed out from the building.

"\_HOOY CRAP!\_"

\* \* \*

><p>The two dragons and the human bust out laughing, and began to walk away.</p>

"\_I have to say I pity the Kid a bit."\_ Julyran commented a few moments later.

"It's a good lesson, next time he will show more caution towards Lark's fantastic ideas." Walther thought out loud. "Now that this is settled, please return to your posts."

"\_Copy that."\_ Julyran said, and took off almost immediately. Penelope decided to wait a bit as she followed Walther to the garage. Walther gave her a few seconds, but as he saw she's having trouble beginning the conversation, he asked away first.

"Something on your mind, Nel?"

"\_Yeah.\_ she began hesitantly \_"I heard that... Boss kinda... disappeared.\_"

"\_I'm afraid so.\_ Walther sighed.

"\_Along with enough booze to knock himself out for a week.\_"

"Pretty much."

While they were talking, Walther approached the guard post, showed his papers and began to go towards the nearest Humvee.

"\_Walt?\_"

"Yes?" Walther asked back, looking at the dragoness.

"\_You think he's alright?"\_ she asked in a concerned tone.

Walther opened the car's door and sat behind the wheel.

"You mean, do I know if he's drinking because he has problems?"

Nel just looked at him and slowly nodded.

Walther gave a weary sigh.

"Which one of us doesn't have problems, Nel? He's just dealing with the pressure in his own way." he stopped to start up the engine, then closed the door. The Night Fury walked went closer the Humvee and looked through the driver side window.

"Do you know where to find him?" she asked quietly.

"He mentioned a place he found along the riverbank. That's my best shot. I have my radio with me, if I can't find him, I'll call you up and we'll figure out something, okay? If I don't call you, everything's fine."

"\_I'll ask Mac to get my headset.\_" Nel nodded, and stepped back from the car. Walther stepped on the pedal, and the car slowly rolled out from the garage, through the camp and down the dirt road.

The Humvee shook badly on the bumpy and snowy road. Walther mumbled a few unsophisticated words about dragons and alcohol, then made a sharp turn off the road to the countryside, heading towards the river Merderet. Luckily, the winter wasn't too harsh so far, the snow wasn't deep yet, so the heavy vehicle could take the abuse.

After like twenty minutes of cross-country driving, he finally came to a stop. He got out of the Humvee, and proceeded downhill towards a certain wreath of the river. Halfway there, he began to hear weird singing.

"\_...just thiiink about your woeful lad (hic) whereeever your fate may taaaaake..." \_

After a mighty facepalm, Walther stopped and called out.

"Lohengrin? Are you there?"

"\_... so heeear out my blue melody..." \_

"Lohengrin?"

"\_... and reeeemember your loooove... Eh... What?" \_

Walther walked a few dozen metres, and behind some bushes, at the bottom of a depression, he found a certain Night Fury weltering and hugging a wooden barrel with his forelegs. The dragon took a look at the human standing above him, and as recognition slowly crept into his foggy mind, he lifted his head from the crumpled camouflage net to address him.

"\_Walt?" \_

"Hope I'm not interrupting..."

"\_Naah, I just tasted this... apple thing... how's it called again..." \_

"Calvados." Walther helped him out, and sat down beside the dragon.

"\_Yeah! That.\_ He gulped down a few mouthfuls, then asked:

"\_I... I suppose there's a reason why you're out here..." \_

"Think hard enough, I'm sure you'll figure it out."

Lohengrin stared into his eyes silently for a few seconds, leaning closer to him, then spoke up in a very serious tone:

"\_You need a drink?" he asked, offering the barrel between his paws.

"Gah! Lohen!"

"\_Bwhahaha, you should've seen your face!" Lohengrin laughed.  
\_"Alright, I'm serious from now." \_

"Are you?" Walther frowned.

"\_Yeah. Don't worry about me, I've been in worse condition."\_ the Fury stopped for a moment to think, then went on with a chatting tone  
\_"Okay, maybe not, but I'm far from being totally KO." \_

"That's good to hear." Walther said "The others are worried about you. Especially Nel."

"\_What a sweet little girl."\_ the dragon grinned \_"I'm afraid she's fallen for me like a blind horse into a ravine." \_

"Oh. That can complicate things."

"\_Well, I have to figure out a gentle enough way to tell her that I'm not his dragon." Lohengrin explained \_"I don't want to offend her but I just don't feel the same way as she does. Mostly because I'm already mated to the most beautiful dragoness of the world." \_he became silent, eyes losing focus as his glare wandered into the distance.

"I still think you should try to visit your family while we're in reserve." Walther commented.

"\_Are you really trying to ruin my mood?" \_

"No, I'm just not entirely blind, y'know. I see how much you're longing to see them again."

"\_Walt." Lohengrin sighed \_"We've been through this before. You have no idea how much I had to force myself to leave in the first place. If I go to the place where I think they are now, I won't be able to leave my love and my son again. Dragon feelings work slightly differently than human ones, but I told you that before." \_

"Right, I remember. I trust you're wise enough to know what's best for everyone."

"\_Thanks for the vote of confidence." Lohengrin murmured and lifted the barrel to his mouth again.

"So, why are you out here?" Walther asked straight "Is it because things got pretty rough at the Seine?"

"\_No." Lohengrin shook his head \_"At least, not entirely. I know I was very close to biting the dust back there, but what already

happened doesn't bother me nearly as much as what's still ahead of us."\_\_

"What do you mean?"

"\_I... I'm afraid.\_ Lohengrin whispered. \_"I can play the mighty leader for anyone, but I'm trembling inside, and it's just getting worse by the week, Walt. I don't want to die not knowing where my daughter is, or if she is at least safe. And we are going to try to siege the greatest fortress ever seen since the War against the Great Darkness. We are going to bite off more than we can chew, and it'll suffocate us. They still have hundreds of thousands of fanatic and brainwashed grunts to throw at us. And you yourself said that nobody managed to successfully invade that damned island for over a thousand years. This war is a monster feasting on blood, and we've been lucky so far. But I'm not sure our luck will hold.\_"

As he heard his friend's concerns, Walther stayed silent for a minute or two, before attempting to answer.

"Look, Lohen" he began "I know it offers little comfort but all of us are afraid of the future. Every soldier has to face uncertainty at times. But think about how far we've come. We are part of the largest fighting force humanity has ever mustered. And we've managed to beat back the armies of evil, despite at times, things looking grim. We kicked the bastards out of the continent, and slowly but surely, the UN is gaining the upper hand everywhere. I am sure that we will have victory, and we will build a better world for both dragons and humans after it."

"\_Sounds good.\_ Lohengrin sighed, sounding less tense than before.

"And hey" Walter smiled at him, placing a hand on the dragon's broad shoulder "We both know that if someone pisses you off, you're unstoppable."

"\_Yeah.\_ he grinned.

"You'll tear them into pieces!"

"\_YEAH!\_"

"You'll show them who's boss!"

The Night Fury let out a tree-shaking roar, then threw his forelegs around the humans frame, pulling him on his chest and covering his face with long, slobbery, fish-flavoured and alcohol-scented licks.

"Gah, stop it! It's disgusting!" Walther protested between laughs.

The dragon finally let him go, so he could sit up and readjust his wet and creasy uniform.

"My clothes, ruined." Walther grumped.

"\_Washing machine!\_" Lohengrin chimed.

"It doesn't wash out, y'know." Walther shook his head, but he couldn't resist smiling again.

"\_Oh come on, just have a drink already!"\_

"I don't want to drink from a barrel."

"\_Oh, I can help you with that!"\_ Lohengrin smiled secretively, and began to wallow around "Now where did I put it... Here!"

He moved his left wing and reached for a spot on the ground with a foreleg, and used his claws to lift and hand over a tin mug to his surprised friend.

"How did this..."

"\_I figured you're gonna come after me eventually, I just didn't expect you to take so long."\_ Lohengrin stated with a victorious grin.

"You're awesome." Walther chuckled, and dipped the mug into the brandy. "Y'know" he said after tasting the drink "if someone would have told me that at one day I was going to sit on the beach of a French river, drinking Calvados with my best friend who's a Night Fury, I'd have said that they were crazy."

"\_Life does crazy things."\_ Lohengrin chuckled too "\_Remember the day we first met?"\_

"Of course I do!" Walther burst out laughing "I was never so scared in my entire life!"

"\_Well yeah..."\_ Lohengrin joined his laughter \_"Y'know... if I think about it, I'm glad I didn't blow you up that day."\_

"I'm glad too." Walther grinned as he reached to scratch a spot behind Lohengrin's ear, earning a contented purr from the huge Night Fury "Even if you came pretty close to it..."

\* \* \*

><p><strong>AN: Let us go forward together! New part, new chapter, new adventures and new dragons to know! Who's with me? :D

><strong>

\*\*As always, ask/comment/review:\*\*

\*\*I\*\*

\*\*I\*\*

\*\*I\*\*

\*\*V\*\*

## 22. Path of Lies - Chapter 1

\*\*A/N: Alright everyone, I feel I owe you guys an apology for this

huge delay. :( There were some unpleasant things in my life I had to sort out first, and I was pretty deconcentrated for weeks.\*\*

\*\*But, I'm back! And more importantly, I have a new chapter in my sleeve! :D\*\*

\* \* \*

><p>Chapter 1.</p>

December 4th, 2031. somewhere southwest of Frankfurt-an-der-Oder

The early-winter night would have been dark and chilly, but the wreckage of the six-wheeled armoured vehicle burned with metre-long flames, illuminating most of the clearing and reflecting on the blue-eyed Night Fury's menacing glare. The soldier thirty steps away from him didn't dare to move a finger, but kept his rifle aiming steadily at the dragon.

Lohengrin quickly estimated the distance between them with his throat still full of gas, then acted quicker than any human possibly could have.

The ball of flaming plasma hit the ground just a few steps away from the human, who floundered backwards and lifted his arms to cover his face from the raining clogs of earth. The Night Fury closed the distance between them with two long, zigzagging jumps, then the soldier felt a jab of pain in his wrists as a forepaw batted the gun out of his hands with irresistible force. Another swipe hit him in the chest forcing out all the air from his lungs and slamming him into the ground.

Lohengrin placed his paw and tightened it on the human's neck, firm enough to keep him from trying anything but loose enough so his claws wouldn't break his skin... yet. He leaned close; baring fangs just a few inches from the human's head, and snarled.

The human's eyes snapped open, his gaze filled with horror as he became aware of how close he was to a painful death. Lohengrin noticed he's staring into his eyes, then he said something in his strange language.

"\_Give me just one reason why I shouldn't tear you into pieces..."\_ he growled at the soldier. He responded in a slightly higher tone, and Lohengrin's nostrils scented the distinct traces of fear coming from him. But as he looked into the human's eyes, he saw something else, beside the terror. Almost as if the human...

"\_Can you understand what I say?"\_ he mumbled, thinking out loud.

Then, the human slowly and well-visibly nodded.

Lohengrin's eyes widened, as he realized the plethora of opportunities this may give him. He was sure humans simply couldn't hear the tones dragons use for communication, until now. But this human seems to understand him... too bad, he didn't understand the human's language. A possible solution crept to his mind, and he took a sharp breath in reluctance. He had never done this before, and the

method could come with dangerous or even lethal consequences.

But this was a risk he decided to take.

Lohengrin closed his eyes, turning the focus of his mind inwards. Then, he mentally reached out, carefully touching the human's mind. The sensation made him shudder, as the unknown mind was incomparable to anything he has ever experienced. It felt like he was submerging himself into something of indescribable consistency, weird and confusing for every sense he had. Its impression and structure was vastly different than any dragons, but at the same time, he felt a sense of compatibility. Maybe the human hasn't lied about understanding him, after all.

He tried to reach deeper where he suspected to find what he needed. He passed emotions, memory patterns and such, but the deeper he went, the more intense the pressure became on his mind. Gritting his teeth, he continued, until he managed to find the certain batch of memories he was looking for. He began to inspect the strange language, vastly different from his own and made out of sounds he would be unable to pronounce.

Once he examined the linguistic knowledge the human possessed, he quickly retreated from his mind. It felt like he's trying to pull his whole head backwards through a narrow tunnel, but then the pressure suddenly ceased and his eyes snapped open. He let out a few rapid breaths, and winced as he shook his head but kept his paw on the human's neck. The whole process didn't take more than a couple of seconds, but Lohengrin felt just as drained as he was after a day-long argument with the Council of Elders back home.

\* \* \*

><p>He shut his eyes and gritted his teeth, awaiting certain death. When he felt a sharp jab inside of his head, he thought the killing blow had finally arrived.</p>

But he was still breathing, so that meant...

His world did not cease to exist, he still heard the crackling fire fifty metres away from him, the weight of the Night Fury's paw still on his neck. Then he felt huffs of air around his face, with the sound closely resembling...

Sniffing?

He opened his eyes, and only saw the flaring nostrils of the dragon at first, as it sniffed him all over his head, stopping at his ears, helmet and cheeks before backing away a bit, paw still pinning him down. Seeing the icy blue glare the dragon shot at him sent a shiver down his back, he knew well what those narrow eyes and slit-like pupils mean, not to mention the set of white fangs made visible by the snarl. Knowing that he may not have too much time left, he gulped, and asked away, despite the obvious fact that dragons in the wilderness aren't used to human language at all.

"Are you going to kill me?"

He felt the claws tightening around his neck a bit, and he suddenly thought that staying quiet would have probably been a better

idea.

"\_That... depends.\_" the Night Fury growled in a deep tone.

The reply surprised him, and lit a spark of hope inside him.

"Look, I-"

"\_Silence.\_" the dragon interrupted \_"I am the one asking questions now.\_"

"A-as you wish." he swallowed again. His mind became flooded with possible questions the dragon may want to get answered, but his thoughts were interrupted when it began to speak slowly, but very much threateningly. Its question was straight to the point.

"\_Explain why humans are killing or taking dragons into captivity.\_"

The man tried to take a deep breath before attempting to answer, but his efforts were somewhat hindered by the clawed paw pinning him down.

"I can explain it to you" he began "but we are still in danger here. Those who tried to get me are going to send more soldiers, and the answer to your question is long." as he spoke, his right hand moved a few millimetres, quietly unbuttoning the holster of his sidearm.  
"Please understand that I've never hurt any of your kind, and I have no intention to do so. If you let me live, I will tell you everything you want, even more."

The dragon stayed silent for a few very long moments, then the man felt the grip on his neck loosening. As the dragon took a step backwards, he immediately released the handle of his pistol, and sat up.

"I'm glad you saw reason." he sighed. "As a sign of trust, I'll get rid of my weapons now."

The dragon watched him closely as he reached for his pistol, and as soon as it was out from its holster, the dragon struck with the speed of lightning, batting it out of his hand.

"\_I'm sure you won't mind if I help you.\_" the dragon growled with a hint of mockery in his voice. \_"Is there anything else you would like to throw away?"\_

Seeing the dragon's suspicious glare, the man realized that his life's depending on his answer.

"\_I have a knife strapped to my other thigh.\_" he admitted without hesitation. The dragon's ear plate twitched, then it nodded. The man slowly pulled out the knife from its sheath and threw it away where his pistol went.

"To sum things up quickly, there is a war going on between us." he began to explain "The side I am fighting against seeks to exterminate dragons, and extend its rule all over the globe for various reasons. Those who oppose them, like me, are putting up a fight, and trying to

save as many dragons as we can. A number of dragons are even fighting alongside us."

The dragon looked at him silently, seemingly waiting for him to continue.

"We should move to a safer place before I tell you the whole story." he said. "If you let me, I'll get my gear and try to find a vehicle for faster movement."

The dragon didn't even flinch an ear, so he decided to slowly stand up, always showing his palms to it, to prove he wasn't going to try anything. He slowly pulled out a flashlight from one of the pouches on his tactical vest, and within a minute, he had his rifle, pistol and knife back.

"Look, I'm taking my knife here" he showed to the dragon, whose eyes followed his every movement. "These things" he said, showing his rifle "work by shooting these yellow things" he detached the magazine and took out a round, to let the dragon take a look. "so if I remove the magazine, like I did, and do this" he pulled back the charging handle, extracting the round from the chamber "it is completely harmless." He demonstrated it by pulling the trigger and the weapon made a sharp click.

"\_Interesting. Now do that to your small weapon as well.\_"

"Okay." the man nodded, acknowledging that he doesn't really have a choice "Pistols work the same way." He emptied his P99, and put it back in its holster, then slung his assault rifle on his back."

"I'm good to go." he said to the dragon "Now all I need is to find a vehicle, then-"

"\_That won't be necessary.\_" the Night Fury interrupted him, and opened his wings, jumped forward and grabbed the man around the shoulder with his forepaws. The human screamed and flailed his legs around as he was lifted up, but the dragon seemed to care little about his comfort.

\* \* \*

><p>Lohengrin's wings flapped forcefully to carry the human higher. He figured that a short flight would help to cool his head, the intense mind-focus he just did caused a terrible headache. Not only did he need to process and understand a huge amount of knowledge in a short time, he also had to concentrate as hard as he could. One stray thought at the wrong time could have caused irreparable damage to the human's mind, maybe in his own too. A quick flight would help to clear his thoughts; but the constant noise of the screaming and cursing human under him certainly did not.</p>

"\_Will you shut up already?!"\_ he hissed angrily as he looked down to the man.

"Do you have any idea how frightening this is?!" the human shouted back in a high-pitched tone.

An evil smile began to colour Lohengrin's features.

"\_Would you like me to let you go?"\_

"Not right now, thanks!" the human cried, avoiding the trap.

But he did stay quiet afterwards, much to Lohengrin's relief. Because he saw the human rushing south earlier, he also decided to go that way to get far from bright flames marking the hostile patrol's final destination. His scales blended into the night, and now that the human was silent too, Lohengrin hoped to get away undetected.

After around half an hour, he began to scan the area, looking for a safe spot to land and hide. A bit farther to the west, he spotted the moonlight reflecting from a lake, located not too far away from a big city. He altered his course, going around the city on their way there, and after a few more minutes, he saw that the lake had a flat, tiny island on it. They would be exposed at a place like that, but the eastern shore of the lake was full of wooded areas, so he decided to find a clearing somewhere there, and set down. Thinking about pulling a prank on the pesky human between his forelegs, he folded his wings, entering a steep dive.

His efforts didn't go without reward, Lohengrin chuckled at the gradually loudening scream of the human.

"SLOW DOOOWN!"

"\_This isn't even speed."\_ the dragon snickered, and bent forward again, now heading straight down.

"HOOOLY SH-"

The rest of the man's terrified cries were blunted by the sounds of Lohengrin's wings, as he levelled off and slowed down with a few forceful flaps, and gently set the human down to the ground before landing gracefully on all fours.

The human fell on all fours too, though much less gracefully than his scaly companion. He slowly stood up, breathing heavily and giving a furious look at the Night Fury in front of him.

"I was \*this\* close to shitting my pants!" he motioned, holding his index finger and thumb quite close to each other.

Lohengrin let out a booming laughter.

"\_It was just too tempting!"\_

"I met a few Night Furies who were playful, but you're over the top, really." the man growled angrily, and sat down, pulling out a palm-sized, flat object from one of his pouches.

"\_What is that?"\_ Lohengrin asked immediately, ears perking up as he stepped closer. He suspected another weapon at first, but the object looked quite harmless.

"It's a PDA."

"\_What?"\_

"Oh, sorry." the human apologized "It's a thing which, among other

things, helps me figure out where are we exactly."

Lohengrin watched closely as a bunch of colourful patches appeared on the surface of the angular thing, accompanied by little things which seemed similar to the runes his kind used to scribe on cave walls.

"This is the map of the area, from a bird's-eye-perspective." the man elaborated and tilted the thing so Lohengrin could see it better "And this tiny red dot, here, marks our spot."

Lohengrin was fascinated by the thing, as it did give a more or less accurate view of the landscape from high up. But instead of asking the tons of questions he had about this contraption, he sat down and cleared his throat, reminding the human that he still has a subject to address.

"Okay, I know." he sighed "Please give me a few more minutes, then I'm at your service."

He kept the PDA in one hand, and pulled off his helmet with the other. Then, he pulled out something which looked like small dumpling on a stick which he strapped on his head, so the round shape was in front of his mouth.

"This is a headset" the man explained, noticing the dragon's questioning glare "I can use this to communicate with people far away from here."

Lohengrin was about to threaten him to stop saying nonsense, when the human began to talk into the contraption, occasionally tapping the PDA with his fingers.

"HQ this is Echo-Seven-Niner, do you copy?"

The Night Fury's mouth opened in disbelief, as his ears picked up the response.

"\_\*\_\*Lima-charlie\*, Echo. Go ahead."\*\*\_

"I have a report ready, establishing an uplink now." the man said, wildly tapping the contraption in his hands.

"\_\*\_\*Solid copy Echo, be advised, that strong jamming in the area is affecting connection speed."\*\*\_

"Roger that." he confirmed, and stayed silent for a minute or two. In the meantime, tiny objects flashed on screen of the PDA. Lohengrin was about to ask what's going on, when the man spoke up again."

"Package sent, HQ."

"\_\*\_\*Confirmed. What's your ETA?"\*\*\_

"I'll be back in twenty hours."

"\_\*\_\*Affirmative, Echo. HQ out."\*\*\_

"Alright..." the soldier sighed, then pulled off the headset and

threw it into the helmet. "I'm sorry" he apologized, looking at the Night Fury "This was very important."

"Just tell me where they hide the abducted dragons, and I'll be on my way." Lohengrin murmured.

"I'm afraid things are more complicated than that." the human shook his head "I'd like to give you a better understanding before you decide which way you want to go. So we better get ourselves comfortable, because this is going to be one long story."

"I don't know when exactly the things began, but just a couple of decades ago, we, humans, didn't even know about the existence of dragons. We had a few legends and stories of old times, but these weren't taken too seriously. The first dragon-sightings happened around twenty years ago. A bunch of smart people decided to study them, and we realized that dragons can be friendly and tame, if we approach them appropriately. In just a few years, dragons were just as ordinary for us as dogs and cats, lots of people kept dragons around their homes; some dragons were even employed as workers effectively being parts of working communities. Do you follow me?"

"Mostly." Lohengrin nodded slowly. "This all sounds crazy for me but I have seen dragons who lived in your cities, so I'm inclined to believe what you say."

The man continued to talk as he was walking around, collecting fallen twigs and larger stones, making a fire pit.

"Most of the people liked the dragons, but some not. A particularly crazy cult, formed by a man nobody knows by name, began to preach nonsense about the changing world, and how the dragons are blasphemous creatures according to their religion. But the loud speeches were just for show, this madman and his minions worked in the shadows. Bribing or persuading politicians, government officials, bankers, industrial magnates, they began to spread their influence. Very few people suspected that they were up to something, everyone thought they are just crazy cultists making a lot of noise, like other crazy cultists do. The situation blew up roughly a year ago. There were worldwide revolutions and coups, tearing apart almost every country, putting those in power who supported this cult, and together they began to form a multi-continental state called Commonwealth for the New Order, or COFNOR in short. Hell broke loose in the COFNOR-occupied countries, tens of thousands of people were killed, millions were forced to pick up their twisted views as state religion, and they began to kill or capture any and all dragons they could find. The sane part of humanity quickly tried to reorganize itself under one single banner to oppose the COFNOR. The United Nations tried to gather all forces who disagreed with the COFNOR, but the cultists went on the offensive immediately. No one knows exactly how, but they are manipulating the masses against us. The situation isn't perfect, but we're doing what we can to improve things."

After he finished his speech, the man took a concerned look at the Night Fury sitting in front of him.

"That's... pretty much what I know."

Lohengrin was silent for a while, trying to comprehend the things he

had heard.

"\_I don't understand half of the words you used..." he began slowly, eyes fixating on a stone beside the fire pit \_"But to sum things up, you humans are split into two groups, one of them hates dragons while the other tries to save us from... them, and bring peace back to the world?"\_

"Brief but accurate, yeah." the man nodded.

"\_O..kay. Can I ask something?"\_

"Sure."

"\_ARE YOU HUMANS FUCKING CRAZY OR SOMETHING?!\_" Lohengrin roared in outrage, rocketing to all fours \_"KILLING EACHOTHER AND EVERYONE AROUND BECAUSE OF... SOME SORT OF DISAGREEMENTS?! HAVE YOU EVER HEARD ABOUT THE SUBTLE ACT OF TALKING?!"

"Hey, hey!" the human backpedalled with raised hands "You can't argue with fanatics, they refuse to listen! And everyone is suffering because of them, not just humans!"

"\_Because of the nonsensical babbling of one moronic human\_" Lohengrin growled, panting violently in anger, claws digging furrows into the ground \_"one third of my clan is \_\_\*\*dead\*\*\_\_, and another five, including my own daughter were captured to be taken who-knows-where!"\_

"Look, I'm truly sorry for what happened to you, but maybe we can do something to help the ones you're missing!" the man said quickly, clearly afraid of the outraged Night Fury.

The dragon's pupils slowly widened a bit, but not much.

"\_Speak.\_"

"We, the UN forces, are trying to push back the enemy, and liberate all the occupied places. If your daughter is kept alive, we may be able find her eventually."

Lohengrin shut his eyes and forced himself to sit down, taking deep breaths to control his anger. He had to find his daughter. But, he has no idea where is she now. Systematically searching the whole continent would take years, maybe even more. Without the slightest clue or lead, a search like that offers little chance of success.

"\_You said, the central figure of this... madness is one human.\_" he opened his eyes to look at the human again \_"Where is he?"\_

The soldier gulped.

"His revolution began in Great Britain, and we suspect that is where his base of operations is." he said "But if you're thinking about going there alone, you won't make it. Not because I doubt your abilities, you convinced me already that you can handle yourself" he added, seeing the dragon's disagreeing glare "but it doesn't matter how great of a fighter you are, there are just simply too many

enemies to avoid, even for you. There are hundreds of thousands of soldiers between us and Britain, and you would have to fly above enemy territory for weeks."

Lohengrin shut his eyes again. This is just getting worse and worse. Does he even have a chance now? Going alone against millions or going together with people he can't trust against those millions? Who knows how long this war will last? How many people he will have to kill, battles to fight, blood to spill for reuniting his family again?

The questions echoed in his mind, but his throbbing headache didn't help him to properly concentrate. In an effort to give himself some time, he decided to change the subject.

"\_Answer me this, how can you understand me in the first place?"\_ he asked with eyes still closed.

"Hm. I don't exactly know why, but it seems like I was born like this." the human explained " I first saw dragons when I was a younger boy. After I spent some time around them, I realized that I could somewhat understand them better than my friends or family. This understanding gradually evolved into hearing your speech. A few smart people tried to figure out what's the cause of this, but they could not. There are a few other fellows who can understand dragons like I do, but we are extremely rare. People around call us 'dragon-whisperers'." He chuckled at the nickname.

This made Lohengrin momentarily forgot about his troubles. So that's why he felt that the human's mind was both similar and foreign... it explained a few things, but raised more questions. Would it be a coincidence that humans seemingly forget about the existence of dragons, then discover them just before a time of crisis? And some understand them, too? As if the two species were meant to cooperate with each other...

Lohengrin shook his head. Right now, he has more pressing matters to think about. But at the same time, he felt himself completely unable to decide.

"Look." the human spoke up softly, probably because he saw the Night Fury's inner conflict "I have a family and a home too. My wife and daughter are expecting me back, and I want to be back with them. But I'm not willing to let my daughter grow up in a world of insanity if there's anything I can do about it. I don't enjoy killing others. But I'm doing what I have to, so the ones I love can be safe from these monsters."

Lohengrin looked into the blue eyes of the human in front of him, and he clearly saw the honesty in there. And in the same moment, he began to feel something he never thought he would.

Understanding, for a human. He sighed as his muscles loosened, finally dropping his alerted stance.

"\_I think I have no choice." \_he began slowly \_"I will have to team up with you."\_

"We desperately need all the help we can get" the human nodded, then a faint smile appeared on his face "and now that you probably won't kill me, I'd like to properly introduce myself. My name is Walther,

but my friends call me Walt."

"\_Walther..."\_ the Night Fury tasted the foreign-sounding name \_"You may call me Lohengrin."\_

"Despite the circumstances" Walther grinned "I'm glad you decided to show up, and pull me out of the fire. I owe you one."

"\_I have a score to settle with the crazy fanatics."\_ Lohengrin let out a faint smile, too. \_"Don't mention it."\_

"I planned to spend the night here, and head back to base tomorrow morning, so-"

"\_Didn't you report that you needed twenty hours to get back?"\_ Lohengrin cut in.

"I may have... lied a bit." Walther chuckled "My mission is completed, and I'm sure nobody minds if I don't run back immediately. I could use a sleep, and I am very curious about you, too."

Lohengrin's ears twitched.

"\_How so?"\_

"Well, you Night Furies are very rare, and in my opinion, very interesting dragons. And you're the first one I ever met who didn't grow up in a city, so..."

"\_I think we won't sleep too much tonight."\_ Lohengrin lamented \_"We have a lot to talk about. Previously, I was under the impression that all humans were savage murderous eels. I have to reconsider my opinion somewhat."\_

"Somewhat?" Walther shot a questioning glare at him.

"\_Yes. You're smell is about as attractive as an eel's, if not worse."\_ Lohengrin said with a wry smile.

"What? Smell? That's not tr-" he only got to this point before raising his arm to smell his own armpit. After just one sniff, his head rapidly turned away, choking and coughing wildly.

"CHRIST! I think you're... right." Walt agreed sadly, wiping off his tears.

A toothy grin appeared on Lohengrin's face.

"\_Told you."\_

\* \* \*

><p><strong>AN: So finally, these two have met. :) Didn't go without bumps, but hey, they're both alive! :D Oh and one other thing:

><strong>

\*\*\*Lima-charlie: LC, stands for "loud and clear". Military guys love their fancy speech. :)\*\*

\*\*As always, please tell me what you think!\*\*

\*\*And dear "ttt" the answer to your question is: "I haven't decided yet. ;)" If you make an account, I can answer you with a PM much sooner, y'know. :)  
><strong>

\*\*Rate, Comment, Review!\*\*

\*\*I\*\*

\*\*I\*\*

\*\*I\*\*

\*\*V\*\*

## 23. Path of Lies - Chapter 2

### Chapter Two

The flames of the campfire danced happily, gifting some warmth and light to the chilly winter's night. Walther walked around, adding or rearranging a few twigs, occasionally searching for small cans in his equipment. Lohengrin curiously watched as he pulled out a number of differently shaped boxes, and began to heat up one, holding it at the base of the fire with a metal stick.

"Can I offer you some?" the soldier asked, surprising the dragon a bit.

"\_Some... what?"\_ Lohengrin asked back, looking at the metal can with confusion.

"I'm making a dinner" Walther explained "I thought you might be a bit hungry, so-"

"\_You want to share your food with me?"\_ Lohengrin glared at the human.

"Yeah, I'd like to. If you're okay with that." the man replied with a smile.

Lohengrin's ears flattened to his head, as he took a surprised look at the human in front of him. He wasn't sure if the human knew, but sharing food between dragons was a show of honest trust, and willingness to continue on friendly terms. An act of friendship.

"\_Alright... I guess."\_ Lohengrin said hesitantly.

Walther continued his activities, placing a collapsible metal grid on the fire, and putting a few cans on top of it. While he was preparing the dinner, he spoke up again:

"You know... the first time I saw you I figured that you were a wild Night Fury..."

"\_I am pretty wild when I blow things up."\_

"No" Walther laughed "I mean you're not from human populated areas. You live with your own kind, out somewhere in the wilderness, as far from us as possible."

"\_I used to be like that.\_ Lohengrin said quietly, looking into the eyes of the soldier.

"Then, how can you understand my language so well?"

Lohengrin sighed. He knew this question would eventually pop up, and while the answer was complicated, he decided to explain it as simply as possible.

"\_Surely you noticed something happened after I pinned you down.\_ he began.

"Yeah, I had a sudden headache... is it related to your understanding of my language?" Walther asked curiously.

"\_It is.\_ Lohengrin nodded \_"As far as I've noticed, you humans communicate with each other mainly vocally, and by some gestures. Is that correct?"\_

"Yes."

"\_We dragons are a bit different. The dragon way of communication is made up of three components: body language, vocalization, and a sort of mental component only dragons can understand. Using our minds to feel the presence of someone else around us is completely instinctive, and about as natural to us, as talking is to you.\_"

"So, if I understand this right..." Walther began to think out loud "You dragons are mind-readers?"

"\_I'm not sure what do you mean by that.\_ Lohengrin shook his head \_The mind is not something you can simply 'read' like an inscription on a cave wall. It works more like a link; two minds get connected by a very slight margin, and transfer thoughts, feelings and impressions back and forth. Anyone can hear me making sounds and making gestures in my own way, but the essence of what I want to say comes with the mental part. The mental part of my speech tells you what am I saying, the verbal and body gestures tells you how am I saying it, such as indicating my emotional state. I strongly suspect that you are able to understand dragon speech because your mind somehow has the ability to connect with a dragon mind.\_"

"Incredible..." Walther whispered "There are so many things we don't know about your kind. You know, dragons are regarded as fantastic creatures by most of humanity, but now we have the opportunity to speak and learn about beings who are of a similar level of intelligence, as us."

"\_To be fair\_ Lohengrin commented \_"I didn't know you humans were sentient beings for most of my life. But then again, my home used to be secluded enough not to see humans for generations.\_"

"How old are you?" Walther asked.

\_ "Old enough to be fully grown, why?"\_ Lohengrin asked back, shooting a questioning glare at him.

"I mean, how old are you exactly? I'm thirty-one years old."

\_ "Years?"\_

"A year is twelve months." Walther explained.

\_ "Was that supposed to make sense?"\_

"I guess it's hard to describe, how do you measure time?"

\_ "We use each winter as a sort of... natural clock."\_

"Ah! We'll a year is basically the same," Walther interrupted.

\_ "I see, you humans love your precision."\_ Lohengrin nodded \_"Then I am forty-five years old."\_

"Hm. I've only encountered Night Furies who were younger than me... but, I have only met a few of your kind so far, most of which were rescued as babies so they don't know much about their own species, sadly."

\_ "How long do you humans live?"\_ the Night Fury asked.

"Well... anything between sixty and a hundred can happen. It depends a lot on lifestyle and place of birth, as there are places where living is a lot harder than somewhere else. I'd say, the average lifespan of a human is somewhere between seventy and eighty years."

\_ "So, you lived one-third of your life already...?"\_ Lohengrin voiced his surprise.

"I... well, yes I suppose so." Walther answered uncomfortably "What about you?"

\_ "Under the given circumstances, I don't know how long will I live"\_ the dragon replied sourly \_"But my kind can see seven or eight hundred winters, if they are lucky."\_

It was Walther's turn to be surprised now.

"Heilige Titten! And you're already fully grown?"

As he opened his mouth to answer, Lohengrin's ear twitched, and he turned his attention to the canned food instead, which was sizzling loudly.

"\_Is this supposed to do that?"\_

"ScheiÃŸe!" Walther exclaimed, and grabbed the can to get it away from the heat, threw it away a second later as it burned his palm. While he swore loudly, and ran to the lake nearby to get his hand into the water, Lohengrin shook his head:

"\_If a piece of metal gives you this much trouble, how would you fare in an actual hunt?"\_

"I got distracted, okay?!" Walther shouted back from the shore.

The dragon suppressed a chuckle, then stood up to fetch the dangerous can of food. He quickly found it in the bushes, grabbed it with his fangs, and casually walked up to the human, dropping the can into the shallow water.

"\_Try touching it now."\_ he grinned as he sat down again, curling his tail around his legs.

"Thanks." Walther growled in annoyance, and pulled his hand out of the water to see it. The skin had turned a harsh red, the ridges of the tin can left ugly marks on his palm.

"This is fantastic." he said sarcastically "I survive a firefight, only to get incapacitated by a goddamn tin can."

"\_Let me take a look."\_ Lohengrin leaned closer. The soldier lifted his hand, the dragon sniffed it a few times, then spat a huge glob of saliva into it.

"GAH! What the f-"

"\_Slap your paws together" \_Lohengrin instructed calmly\_"and rub the saliva into the burn wound. It will help."\_

"Well, thanks, I guess." Walther said hesitantly, and rubbed his palms together "It does help, I can barely feel the pain now!" he exclaimed. "This is amazing!"

"\_Unlike you, I am a creature of fire. I know how to handle it."\_ Lohengrin stated with a shadow of a smile on his face.

"I'll have you know that humans mastered fire tens of thousands of years ago!" Walther frowned.

"\_If this is your 'mastery', I don't want to see you doing things you're bad at!"\_ Lohengrin burst out laughing.

"Accidents can happen, okay?" Walther protested, but he began to smile too "But I have to admit that this was rather... unprofessional."

"\_It was."\_ Lohengrin confirmed still smiling, then he asked:

"\_How's your paw?"\_

"\_It's called 'hand', and it's..."\_ Walther took a look at his burned palm, and he was surprised to notice that the ugly shade of red the wound had turned was now a light pink. "\_It's healing!"\_

"\_You may wash it off now for the time that we're eating, I'll give you another treatment after it. It will be completely gone by the morning.\_"

"I... I don't know what to say..."

"\_A simple 'Thank you.' will suffice."\_ the dragon grinned at him again.

"I'm going to give you this whole thing, you deserve it. Mincemeat is my favourite, but I'll heat up something else, I think I still have some stew." Walther dipped his hands into the water, washed off the thick saliva and grabbed the can again. This time it wasn't hot, so he reached for one of his pockets, a pulled out his tin-opener.

"If you open your mouth, I can spoon the food right into it." he offered.

"\_Alright.\_"

The contents of the tin can weren't even a mouthful for the Night Fury. Lohengrin slowly shut his jaw, and began to carefully chew on the strange thing in his mouth, which was supposed to be meat, but it had all kinds of foreign taints and tastes. Suppressing a frown, he swallowed the so called 'food'.

"Well?" Walther asked "How does it taste?"

"\_It's... edible.\_" Lohengrin answered hesitantly. "\_At least I hope so.\_"

"Oh come on, it can't be that bad! I'm eating this stuff all the time! The spice must've been foreign to you..."

"\_Look, this tastes like a goose's arse!\_"

Walther froze in his shock.

"Did you actually-"

"\_You don't want to know.\_" Lohengrin cut in, ears flattening to his head. But as he saw the expecting look on Walther's face, he reluctantly continued "\_There are occasions, when... when one cannot be picky.\_"

Now, it was the soldier's turn to burst out laughing as he tried to imagine the scene. Lohengrin growled, and clawed the ground in embarrassment.

"\_Hey, I caught it mid-air, but at the wrong spot, okay?!"\_

\* \* \*

><p>The roads around the city of Cottbus were full both ways: Lohengrin saw the endless caravan of cars and sometimes buses leaving the city in a more or less organized fashion; the number of uniform-wearing people took care of that. Another stream of vehicles was heading towards the city, the shape of these in the broad daylight reminded Lohengrin of the war machines he had encountered.</p>

"Enjoying the view?" an annoyed voice asked from below.

Walther hung between Lohengrin's forelegs as they flew. But even he had to admit that this way of travel was a lot faster than going on

foot, despite being quite uncomfortable.

"\_I'm just wondering how many of your kind live in places like these..."\_ Lohengrin said, as he glided towards their destination, a certain set of buildings near the centre of the city. Walther called it 'University Campus', but Lohengrin had no idea what that was. However, the soldier described thoroughly what they are looking for, and the Night Fury spotted the place from afar.

"A lot." Walther moaned, and tried to shift position, and move his numb arms "You know, I'd have been really grateful if you-"

"\_We've been through this.\_" Lohengrin interrupted \_"I am a dragon, not a flying vehicle of yours which you can ride.\_"

"Okay, okay!" Walther sighed, not in the mood to try having a fruitless conversation about convincing the Night Fury to lower his pride a bit. "We're getting close, put me down at the entrance of the courtyard."

The Night Fury bent his head to give an expecting look at him.

"Please." Walther added quickly, and rolled his eyes.

"\_Much better.\_" Lohengrin nodded, and gently spiralled down, releasing the soldier just before getting to the ground. Walther wavered a bit at the first few steps, but after a few deep breaths, he was well enough to turn towards the black dragon.

"I have to settle a few matters, please wait for me here outside, okay?"

Lohengrin gave a nod as he sat down, and watched the human disappearing into a rather large building. He shifted uncomfortably as he looked around, seeing dozens of humans walking around, minding their own business. He caught a few curious looks coming from them, making him even more uneasy. Two days ago he would have thought it would be impossible to be this close to this many humans, without getting into a fight. Walther assured him that his comrades mean no harm to any dragons, but his past experiences with humans did not allow him to be fully calm. His instincts practically screamed at him to move, don't sit completely exposed in a wide courtyard with a bunch of potentially deadly two-leggers around.

He stood up on all fours. A number of vehicles were also quietly sitting at the courtyard, he decided to check one out, which didn't have any humans around it at the moment. As he walked closer, he tried to figure out what in the name of Wotahn is he seeing right now.

This contraption didn't have those round wheels, it was sitting on two horizontal feet. It had a stubby nose, and a huge, transparent area on its front. It also had a long, sleek tail at the back, and the whole thing's shape vaguely reminded him of a dragonfly's. It even had two thin and long blades at the top, making it similar to the dragonfly's wings... but by the looks of it, these wings couldn't move up or down, like his own. As he arrived next to the thing, he stood up to his hind legs, placing a forepaw on the side of the object, raising the other to touch the blade... as he gave it a

gentle push, it moved... sideways.

Rotary wings? How the heck would that work?

There was another one of the thing he was examining, a couple of jumps away. Lohengrin saw two people heading towards it, and another one came in his direction.

"Stand back!" the soldier said, waving his arms around.

Lohengrin snarled at him, but he took a few steps back from the contraption. Who is this human, who thinks he can just shoo him away? But as he saw the two helmet-wearing humans entering the other object, he quickly forgot about his indignation.

The two human inside of the thing began to make movements, touching certain spots on the thing's interior. Lohengrin watched with awe as the rotary wings began to slowly speed up. A loud, high pitched whine emanated from the contraption, and after a minute or two, it began to ascend from the ground.

Vertically.

The thing began to gain altitude, then as soon as it was safely above the buildings, it turned and began to move away.

Lohengrin just watched the flying machine disappear from sight. So this is how humans fly? Maybe not entirely, as the flying thing which attacked Toemnir valley did not have rotary wings, and it was a lot faster too... he had to ask Walther about this. How many ways can a human fly, despite that they lack their own wings so they should have no business in air?

He looked around again, but Walther was nowhere to be seen.

\* \* \*

><p>The office was warm, uncomfortably warm for Walther, as he stood at attention in front of the officer behind his desk.</p>

"Second Lieutenant Walther von Hohenfels, requesting permission to report."

"At ease." the major said, sipping into his mug of coffee before continuing. "OPCOM received your report last night, it is indeed valuable information, Intelligence sends its regards. You have got eight hours to submit your AAR, is there anything else you need?"

"I have, sir." Walther nodded "My mission was only successful because I encountered a friendly dragon."

"I've heard about that. You're one of them dragon-whisperers, aren't you?"

"Affirmative. This dragon would like to enlist in the UN Armed Forces."

The grey-haired major froze between two gulps of his coffee. After a few moments, he lowered the cup back to his desk.

"What kind of dragon this is?"

"Night Fury, sir."

"So, I guess it is wild-born, am I right?" the major looked at Walther.

"Affirmative."

The older man let out a deep sigh.

"Under normal circumstances, Lieutenant" he began "I would be against turning this army into a zoo. But these are not normal circumstances, we need all the help we can get. Can this dragon follow orders?"

"I'm vouching for him personally, sir. He fully understands human language, and he expressed his wish to help with fighting against the Commonwealth. Can I speak freely, sir?"

The major gave a nod, and Walther continued:

"I think a Night Fury could be extremely helpful in covert operations, intelligence gathering, and providing limited fire support. I've seen him take out an enemy APC without any difficulties. I'm fully convinced that this dragon could be a valuable asset in various combat situations."

There was a brief silence in the office, as the older officer thought things over. Walther did his best, not to show his anxiety, after all, getting Lohengrin into the army would be beneficial for everyone...

"Alright." the major spoke up. "You have my permission; this dragon can accompany you on your missions. If it proves its usefulness in the upcoming situations, it can stay."

Walther couldn't help, but let out a relieved huff.

"Thank you, sir."

"Don't make me regret my decision, Lieutenant. Talk to the quartermaster to get some food and accommodation arranged. Dismissed."

Walther about faced, and hastily left the office. As he closed the door, he couldn't help but let out a smile. As he stepped out of the building, he found Lohengrin sitting at the far side of the courtyard, eyeing one of the helicopters.

"\_You've got to tell me how these things work.\_" the dragon said, as he got near to him.

"Hah, yeah, a helicopter doesn't fly in the way you do, but it gets the job done." Walther smiled.

"\_Have you talked to your Leader?"\_ Lohengin asked.

"Commanding officer, and yes, I did. He decided to take you in; we're going to be working together from now on. Essentially, you accompany

me, and help me get things done when I'm on a mission."

"\_It doesn't sound like much.\_ the Night Fury commented.

"Oh you will see. My job is to gather intelligence be-"

"\_Why, are you stupid or what?"\_ Lohengrin asked in a confused tone.

The soldier took a long look at the dragon.

"\_Okay.\_ he sighed \_"We need to go through a bunch of military terms and phrases first.\_"

"\_Seriously... how are you going to explain that intelligence is something you can just... gather? Like berries from a bush? Why are you laughing, I'm asking a serious question!"\_

\* \* \*

><p>In the following few days, Lohengrin spent most of his time with Walther, familiarizing himself with various things about the military he had joined. The soldier brought him dozens of silhouette pictures of fighting vehicles, so he can identify things from a distance. Knowing what he's seeing was crucial, as Walther described to him that the commanders are going to expect them to sneak into enemy-controlled area, take a good look at what the enemy forces are doing, where are they going, how many of them there are, and forward the knowledge to those who can later decide what to do with it. According to Walther, the humans used to be able to utilize even more efficient methods of keeping an eye on the enemy but due to the continent-wide chaos, shortage of equipment, and enemy countermeasures the UN had to rely on alternative ways of gaining information.</p>

The complexity of the human military marvelled Lohengrin. Everyone had their place, like tiny parts in a gigantic machine. Varying sets of rules dictated the actions of everyone, and a strong hierarchical order was present so through the combined efforts of the individual soldiers, the strength of the masses could be concentrated to where it was needed. The system was far from being flawless, but it seemed to work, as the enemy advances were halted in their sector. How the war was going on in other places of the world, Lohengrin had no clue.

Everything was fine as long as he had something new to learn, something to keep his mind occupied. But Walther had lots of other matters to take care of, and he often left him alone for hours, and that was when he began to feel troubled.

Concern built up inside him, poisoning his mind, making him restless and unable to sleep. Concern for those he had left behind, for his mate, his son, his clan. He spent countless hours in sleepless nights, thinking about them, trying to guess where they were, and wishing that they were safe, despite how grim things looked. The dilemma of Larany was probably even worse. He had seen a couple of times, what the maniacs of this "commonwealth" were capable of. The mere attempt to imagine what is his daughter was going through now filled his heart with dread. Will he be able to find her? Will he make it in time?

Lohengrin was only sure of one thing, and he tried his best to draw strength from it: he was sure, that all of his family members were alive. The invisible link binding their souls together would have told him if things would be the other way. They were too far away to find comfort in each other's presence, but should one of their souls depart from this world, they would feel it, regardless of the distance.

Luckily, his had the opportunity to sweep all the anxiety to somewhere deep in his mind, when Walther told him about their first mission together.

\* \* \*

><p>Now he was silently flying behind a black helicopter, which carried Walt and his equipment to their destination. Focusing on the task ahead of them, he flapped his wings harder, going above the helo to keep distance from the turbulence it was causing. Tonight will be interesting, that's for sure.</p>

Walther hastily jumped out of the helicopter, which barely touched the ground, and ran a few metres before hitting the dirt.

"Thanks for the lift, Indian." he growled to his radio.

"\*\*Anytime, Echo. Light 'em up."\*\*

"Acknowledged. Echo out." Walther kneeled up as the helicopter hastily retreated south, but he couldn't see Lohengrin.

"\_Looking for me?"\_ a low voice came from behind.

Walther took a sharp breath. The Night Fury was barely visible; he could only see his shimmering blue eyes.

"Stop scaring me out of my pants."

"\_I'll take that as a compliment.\_"

"Okay, we'll head north. HQ is trying to map the enemy supply lines, so if we see anything with meaningful transport capabilities, we note it."

"\_Understood.\_" Lohengrin nodded "\_It would be easier if I could go on ahead, but I'd have to return if I see something.\_"

"I have thought about that." the soldier said, and began to search his pouches "I acquired an extra radio, we just have to strap it on you... wait. Will it even work?"

"\_What do you mean?"\_ the dragon asked.

"I'm talking about that mind-thing you mentioned about your way of speech-"

"\_It will work.\_" Lohengrin confirmed.

"How?"

"\_Look, you still have to hear me in order to get what I'm saying... to use your terms, I am broadcasting a coded signal in multiple parts, you need to catch all parts in order to get the message."\_ the Night Fury explained \_"You have to either see me or hear me \_\_\*\*and\*\*\_\_ get the mental part. Everyone can do the first two, only you can do the third."\_

"Alright then. I'll get this on you. It's voice active, I set it to your usual volume so it'll activate automatically once you begin to speak to me. Fly up, head north, and keep an eye out without being seen okay? And don't go too far."

"\_I'm a Night Fury.\_" Lohengrin stated \_"I can only be seen when I want to.\_"

With those words, he took off, rapidly gaining altitude. The weather was perfect for hiding: dark, cloudy night, but no precipitation to limit his vision. As far as he could tell, humans had trouble trying to see in the dark, which was a huge disadvantage. Neither side dared to use radar for a prolonged period of time, because they both had ARM missiles to take them out. So he could fly without the fear of being detected.

As he reached an altitude which he considered safe enough, but low enough for safe identification, he began to circle around the position of Walther down below.

"\*\*Radio check. Eyeball, this is Echo seven-niner, do you read?"\*\* Lohengrin heard the soldier's voice in his ear, somewhat low and distorted, but acceptably well.

"\_I'm getting a bit of static. But it's all right.\_" he growled, and Walther replied almost immediately.

"\*\*Static is likely, because of all the ECM in the area."\*\*

"\_Copy that. Maintaining observation. Eyeball out.\_" Lohengrin responded.

The first few hours of the night went away uneventfully. They slowly but surely got closer to a highway. Lohengrin could see a darkened village and a rather large forest to the north. He had expected this to be boring, but he was determined to keep his guard up, in case of something unexpected. Down below, Walther waded through the tall grass, occasionally stopping for a minute to check their position on his tablet.

Then suddenly, Lohengrin spotted a pair of lights crawling out from the forest, heading south.

"\_Convoy on the road, heading south.\_" he reported.

"\*\*I don't have a visual on it yet, but I'll get on a hill immediately."\*\* Walther replied hastily, and as Lohengrin looked down, he could vaguely see him running towards the slope in front of him. Turning his attention back towards the column of vehicles, he narrowed his eyes, trying to figure out what kinds of convoy he's looking at. The first vehicle was a wheeled tank, definitely an infantry carrier. The other end of the column was still in the forest, but he spotted another infantry vehicle around the

middle.

"\*\*I'm in position."\*\* Walther's calm voice came from the earphone in his right ear. \*\*"Yeah, I spotted them too, an IFV is leading up the trucks. Can you make out any more details yet."\*\*

"\_I'll land in the forest to take a closer look.\_ Lohengrin said.

"\*\*Are you sure you can stay hidden?"\*\*

"\_Positive.\_"

Going into a shallow dive, Lohengrin silently descended, heading for the trees, looking for a spot to get through. He found a fallen tree not far from the road, and after a minute of sneaking, was close to the convoy, which was even bigger than he thought. Every seventh vehicle was an armed escort, the rest were flatbed trucks. He tried to determine what was inside the trucks, and after enough crawling, he managed to peek into one of them, just when the lights of the following truck illuminated the cargo compartment.

He saw faces. Scared faces of men, women, and children. Families, desperately trying to hold together as they are taken away.

Lohengrin's eyes grew wide in horror, as he backtracked and turned away. Knowing that he had seen enough, he rushed out of the forest, and took off, heading towards Walther's position on the hilltop.

"What did you see?" he asked as the dragon arrived.

"\_They are transporting civilians!"\_

The face Walther made mirrored his own feelings about this. The soldier let out an angered huff, looked over the details of the convoy again and he reached for his radio.

"Checkmate, this is Echo seven-niner. Enemy convoy spotted at sector foxtrot, map grid three-three-four-niner, heading: two-four-eight degrees, speed: fifty. At least three-five CTs, escorted by five IFVs. Cargo is confirmed friendly. I repeat, cargo is confirmed friendly."

"\*\*Solid copy Seven-Niner, standby for further orders."\*\*

Walther sighed, as he put down his headset.

"\_Okay, now what?"\_ Lohengrin asked impatiently, tail lashing left and right.

"We have to wait until HQ decides what to do. They may come up with a rescue operation, although I don't know if we have enough units in the vicinity. Extracting civilians is usually a priority."

The dragon sat down, eyes fixed on the column, which was roughly five kilometres ahead of them.

"\_I think I have an idea.\_"

"Look, if you're thinking what I'm thinking you're thinking, it's not a good idea!" Walther protested.

"\_Why? We have the element of surprise."\_

"There is only the two of us. They can have fifty people in the IFVs."

"\_I eat IFVs for breakfast, you know."\_ the Night Fury grinned at him.

Walther stared into his eyes for a long moment, then grabbed his rifle.

"You know that HQ is going to screw us. We have orders not to engage, just observe."

"\_I'm not going to let these fanatics ruin the lives of even more innocents who have nothing to do with this.\_ Lohengrin stood up.  
\_"They aren't any different than your family." \_he added quietly.

"Too right." Walther sighed. He pulled back the charging handle on his rifle, arming it, but when he looked back into Lohengrin's eyes, his gaze was solid with determination.

"Let's do this."

\* \* \*

><p><strong>AN Yeah, let's do this! In the... next chapter?  
:3\*\*

\*\*For people who aren't military geeks, let me give you a hand with the abbreviations:\*\*

\*\*OPCOM - operation command\*\*

\*\*AAR - after action report\*\*

\*\*IFV - infantry fighting vehicle\*\*

\*\*APC - armoured personnel carrier\*\*

\*\*ARM - anti-radiation missile, follows stuff which emit radio signals, like radars.\*\*

\*\*HQ - headquarters\*\*

\*\*Is there anything else? Throw a PM at me if something's not clear.  
:)\*\*

\*\*And as always, please tell me your opinion!\*\*

\*\*I\*\*

\*\*I\*\*

\*\*I\*\*

\*\*V\*\*

## 24. Path of Lies - Chapter 3

\*\*A/N: I was told that it might be better if I would get clear of all the abbreviations & stuff at the beginning, so here they are:\*\*

\*\*MBT: Main Battle Tank\*\*

\*\*FUBAR: F-ed up beyond all recognition ;)\*\*

\*\*Reactive armour: [wiki/Reactive\\_armour](#)\*\*

\*\*Anything else not clear, let me know. But enough of me now, onwards!\*\*

\* \* \*

><p>Chapter 3.</p>

He saw the scene quite well from his current position. The long convoy of trucks and armoured vehicles slowly came to a halt, as the vanguard noticed the hastily thrown broken tree logs on the road. Two soldiers crawled out of their APC, carefully moving closer to the obstacle, weapons ready, keeping a lookout for anything suspicious. Probably they wouldn't expect to encounter resistance tens of kilometres behind the frontlines, but they tried to be sure.

Not that it could help them.

The crosshair slowly settled on the helmet of one gasmask wearing soldier. Walther let out a deep breath to empty his lungs and somewhat calm his hammering heart. His index finger slowly touched the trigger, ready to press down.

An almost inaudibly low and short pop escaped the barrel of the silenced M14, and his target collapsed. The other one got less than two more seconds before joining his comrade.

"Scratch two. Changing position." Walther mumbled into his radio.

Moments later, a bright blue fireball struck the APC at the front of the column as it tried to reverse. Walther saw the remote controlled machinegun turret flying far off, as the whole vehicle blew apart, the flying debris only narrowly missing the flatbed truck behind it. Right after it, another plasma blast hit the APC at the end of the line, blocking the path backwards, too.

"\_\*\*Call it even.\*\*\_\_" Lohengrin's deep growl came as a response.

"Nice job!" Walther huffed as he ran downhill, and jumped behind a bush, in order to find a different firing position. While he was running, he saw opening hatches on the other APCs, but before he could say anything, he began to hear an intensifying whistling

sound.

He looked up to the cloudy sky, and vaguely saw a black shadow diving at breakneck speed, letting loose three smaller fireballs. The explosions shattered the ground and the vicinity became filled with cries of anger and desperation as the Fury disappeared into the night again.

"\_\*\*Armoured vehicles down. Multiple foot mobiles scattered around and trying to regroup."\*\*\_

"Great." Walther hissed into the microphone. "Pick off whom you can, then maintain overwatch, I'd prefer to stay out of nasty surprises."

"\_\*\*Copy that."\*\*\_

With one, fluid movement, Walther removed the scope from his rifle, and fixed his bayonet at the tip of the barrel. He cringed at the sight of it, but sometimes, there are no other options left. He ran up to the flaming wreckage of the first personnel carrier, and spotted four enemy soldiers rushing forward. He immediately raised his rifle, shooting twice before jumping behind cover. One of his shots missed, the other one smashed the plexiglass of a gas mask, making its owner hit the ground to never move again.

For a moment, Walther was glad he could jump behind the wreckage, the leftover armour plates deflected the rain of fire he received from the COFNOR soldiers. He knew he had to come up with something because he won't last long against three, so reached towards his hip, until his hand found a flashbang. He grabbed it, turned towards them from behind cover, removed the safety pin and threw it where he suspected the soldiers' position were. He then immediately went prone, hands covering his ears.

Immediately after the detonation, he got up and rushed towards the blind and disoriented soldiers, shooting them in the chest one by one. He stopped for a moment to catch his breath and examine the situation. He could faintly hear a few screams, but otherwise Lohengrin's work was very silent.

Someone stuck his head out of the cargo compartment of the truck next to him, looking around with a horrified expression.

"Stay in the truck and keep your head down!" Walther shouted "We'll get rid of the enemy and move you to safety!"

The scared man immediately pulled back, and Walther began to move along the convoy, trying to find more soldiers. Other than a few bloody spots, he couldn't see anything. Stopping at a different truck, he reached for his earpiece.

"Lohe-"

Suddenly, a soldier who was hiding behind the truck, threw himself at him, screaming inarticulately and waving a knife. Only his fast reflexes saved Walther's life, as he grabbed his rifle and managed to lift it up, catching the upcoming slash with the rifle's stock. The fanatic's leg sprung forward almost immediately, kicking Walt in the stomach, making him fall backwards to the ground. His attacker

followed him, trying to add his weight into the stab, but Walt let go of his rifle and managed to get a grip on the knife-holding hand, stopping the blade only a few centimetres from his eye. He groaned as he tried to twist his enemy's wrist to the side, and swung his left elbow to hit the soldier in the face. The knife just barely missed his face and etched the road under them as they rolled to the right, but the black-wearing soldier let go of the knife's handle with one hand, and punched him in the face, right under his eye. A pained yowl escaped Walther, as they both rolled back, and the soldier raised the knife for strike, when...

Something huge and black swung into the picture, hitting the fanatic in the head and slamming it to the truck's side. The man dropped his knife instantly, and ceased every movement as he lost consciousness.

Walther spent a few seconds lying on the ground, trying to catch his breath before looking up and recognizing Lohengrin, who still held the enemy soldier against the truck with his tail.

"\_Are you alright?"\_

"Yeah..." Walther panted "I...I'll be fine. Thanks."

"\_No problem."\_ the dragon nodded, and turned towards the pinned soldier.

"Lohen, wai-"

Before he could have finished his sentence, Lohengrin's clawed paw slashed the neck of the unconscious soldier. Walther's eyes grew wide as he witnessed the execution.

"He was neutralized already!" he shouted.

Lohengrin quietly sat down, and began to lick the blood off his paw. He only spoke up as he glanced over Walt, and noticed his upset expression.

"\_And?\_"

"And?! We could have interrogated him, or-"

"\_I don't care.\_"

"What?!" Walther asked in shock.

Lohengrin stared into his eyes, and Walther immediately understood that the Night Fury is just as upset as he was.

"\_I'm going to show them the same mercy they showed to my kin.\_" he growled menacingly, then stood up and began to walk away. While the two of them were talking, the civilians began to slowly crawl out of the trucks, nervously looking around.

"Excuse me." a man approached Walther as he stood up as well "Are you from the United Nations?"

"Yes." Walt nodded "We're here to rescue you."

"Can I ask where the rest of your unit is?" the man asked curiously.

"You're looking at it. This is an improvised operation. And I'm going to need your help."

"Errm... Mine?"

"Yes, yours. Go help me check all these trucks, and round up drivers for each one. We have to get out of here before enemy reinforcements arrive."

"O-kay." the man stuttered, and began to run along the convoy. Walther picked up his rifle from the ground, and headed back towards the flaming wreckage of the first APC, only to find Lohengrin sitting not far from it and staring into the fire. He saw the dragon's earplate flick as he approached him, and as he got close, Lohengrin spoke up in a much calmer way than before.

"\_I'm sorry if seeing me killing members of your kin makes you feel uncomfortable.\_ his forepaws flexed, claws scraping the asphalt.

\_But don't ask me to be kind to those who murdered a third of my clan, destroyed my home and tore my family apart.\_

Walther let out a deep sigh as he reached the dragon, and put a palm on his neck.

"I..." he began "I guess I would do something similar if I would be in your place..."

"\_Let's hope you'll never have to.\_

"Alright. We need to figure out a way how to push the wreck out of the way so the trucks can move."

"\_I think I have a solution for that.\_ the dragon said flatly \_"Get back.\_"

They both took a few steps backwards from the remains of the APC, then Lohengrin took a deep breath, and shot a fireball at it. The impact caused the burning chassis to flip up and land on its side, in the ditch beside the road.

"Nice." Walther grinned "Let's get the rest out of the way, then I can shepherd the flock forwards. With some luck, we can reach our lines before dawn."

"And with even more luck" Lohengrin commented "we might be able to come up with an explanation for OPCOM about why we decided to screw orders."

"Now that's gonna be a tricky." Walther shook his head "But let's deal with one problem at a time."

\* \* \*

><p>Lohengrin looked down as he soared high above, eyeing the column of vehicles under him. With all the headlights turned on, and each following the other one closely, they reminded him of a snake made out of tiny light pearls, slowly crawling forward. Walther managed to

find drivers for every truck, and when they went to remove the other obstacles from the road; they managed to collect some leftover equipment which might come useful later.<p>

Not everything went smoothly though, as they had an incoming transmission from OPCOM requesting a status update of the convoy, and they were not exactly pleased when they heard about the hijack, to put it mildly. But at least they promised air support, that's something.

The rightfulness of their actions was an interesting dilemma for Lohengrin, and he found himself constantly thinking about it while he slowly circled around the convoy, keeping an eye out for possible enemy reinforcements. He was certain that helping innocent people escape from captivity is the right thing, but what if their hasty actions just ruined a possibly better planned rescue mission? He swallowed, as he thought that maybe this wasn't the best idea he'd ever came up with, but it was too late for regrets. And it was hard to feel any regret when he saw all the endlessly relieved faces.

A tickling sensation at his ears interrupted his musing, and his eyes ran through the dark landscape. The cloudy winter night helped a lot to stay invisible, but it also made harder to spot anything. After some time, he decided to lengthen his patrol course, and head further northeast. As he turned, he could see the outskirts of a town to the left, and a relatively small village right ahead. Beyond which, the land was scattered with groves and meadows. Until a faint black line approached him.

The highway. Lohengrin flapped his wings rapidly, to gain more altitude. As he got closer, he could now faintly make out vague black shapes of vehicles.

"\_Walther.\_" he growled into the radio \_"I've got movement on the highway, about twelve clicks to the east, closing in!"\_

\* \* \*

><p>"Alright, we're doing good. Go along on this road, then turn right towards LÃ¶bbben at the intersection." Walther instructed the driver next to him. He sat in the cabin with his tablet on his lap, looking at the map and trying to figure out the fastest way to get back into UN controlled territory. OPCOM may have promised air support, but it is going to take some time till it becomes available. In the meantime, the best thing they can do is run like hell.<p>

"Are we going into the city?" the driver asked.

"Yeah, then follow the road L49 south." Walt confirmed "We will probably have to leave the roads before crossing into UN territory to avoid any checkpoints, but that'll be later.

"I don't know how to say thank you, both of you." the driver said.  
"God knows where those maniacs would have taken us..."

"We're not out of it yet. But you can buy me a beer once we're in safety." Walther grinned.

The driver chuckled too, and he was about to say something when

Walther's radio went online. The incoming growls and screeches didn't make sense to the driver, but it was more than informative to the soldier next to him.

"\_\*\*Walther. I've got movement on the highway, about twelve clicks to the east, closing in!"\*\*\_

"Copy that, do you have any details?" he replied tensely, as he scrolled the map with his fingers to get to the area Lohen mentioned.

"\_\*\*Ten plus vehicles. Can't specify anything else from this distance, I'm heading to take a closer look right now."\*\*\_

"Alright, but be careful!" Walther warned "If they are coming for us, they will surely have some kind of flak with them."

"\_\*\*Noted. I'm seeing a nice batch of clouds to hide, anyway."\*\*\_

"Copy that. See what you can find and get back so we can figure out something."

"\_\*\*Roger."\*\*\_

Walther stayed quiet for a time, despite the nervous looks the driver was giving to him.

"Are we in trouble?" he finally asked.

"Not yet. But there's a chance we will be." Walther said darkly.

\* \* \*

><p>Lohengrin went above cloud level as he flew towards the previously spotted enemy vehicles, and purposefully veered to the right, hoping to fly past them, turn around, and examine them on his way back. The tickling sensation in his ears intensified, but he couldn't tell why, he surely didn't feel anything like that during the convoy attack. He shook his head, and decided to concentrate on the enemy vehicles. He dived under the clouds to see where he is now compared to them.</p>

He was roughly four kilometres from the column on the highway. He quickly recognized eleven tanks moving fast, ten in two lines beside each other, and a loner one slightly behind them. Lohengrin was about to wonder at the strange formation, when he realized that the turret of the last tank is turning towards him. Now he saw that it's a completely different vehicle than the rest. Its turret was shaped like a block, with two horizontal tubes on either side, and...

Realization struck him like a lightning, and he quickly folded his right wing and flapped with the left to throw himself into a flat inverted spin towards the ground. For a half-second his left wing showed surface towards the enemy tank, and while his desperate manoeuvre was enough to narrowly dodge the most of the raining high-calibre autocannon fire, he felt a terrible burning feeling coming from his wing. Barely maintaining control of erratic the spin, he turned his head to see what happened.

He counted four bloody holes in his wing, each the size of a human's fist. He gritted his fangs and twisted himself to face the rapidly approaching ground, and flared his tailfins, aiming to get into a rapid climb. But as soon as he tried to stretch his wings, a wave of pain exploded in his left, as the fast air tore through the holes. He clamped his jaw shut to suppress his roar of pain, and quickly folded his wing, repeating the same falling-spinning manoeuvre.

Then all of a sudden, his radio went online.

"Lohengrin, I see the tracers, what on Earth-"

"\_I'M A BIT PREOCCUPIED!" \_Lohengrin roared, as he narrowly dodged the next volley of fire. He was running out of altitude at a worrying pace, a few more seconds and he wouldn't have the space he needed to manoeuvre out of the path of oncoming fire.

Overcoming his dread, he opened his wings again, and pulled himself out of the crazy spin, levelling off. Doing his best to disregard the obscene amount of pain radiating from his injured wing, he let loose three fireballs in quick succession, then went into a dive towards the forest next to the highway.

The fireballs tore the anti-aircraft tank into pieces, pillars of flames emerged towards the sky, sending flaming metal pieces flying in a thirty metre radius.

Lohengrin's eyes grew wide in horror as the trees got bigger too quickly to avoid a crash. He shut his eyes, and moved his wings to hug his body, as he tumbled through the foliage back-first. Twigs and branches scraped his scales, and a sharp pain exploded in his spine as he hit a small tree, effectively breaking it into two. He slammed into the ground, and rolled a few metres before he finally settled, lying on his aching back, and panting wildly.

He quickly flexed his hind legs, and much to his relief, they moved as they should, so at least he escaped vertebral fracture. As he twitched his ears, he saw that somehow he managed not to lose his radio, either.

"\_Waaalt..."\_ he groaned, while he rolled onto his belly, trying to get on fours.

"\*\*Lohengrin, what's the situation?!"\*\*

The Night Fury finally managed to struggle up on his feet. Once he heard a charming abbreviation fitting for occasions like this, but his currently shocked mind needed a few seconds to find it.

"\_FUBAR!"\_ he panted into the microphone.

\* \* \*

><p>Walther climbed out to the roof of the driver's cabin, and constantly gazed at the sky, dearly hoping to spot a returning Night Fury. The truck wasn't going especially fast, as they needed to keep the convoy together. A while later, he did manage to spot a barely visible black patch on the sky, but something was very unusual by the

way it flew.<p>

"Stop the truck!" Walther shouted, and stamped on the roof a few times. The vehicle slowly came to a halt, and so did the others behind it.

As the dragon got close, the soldier saw how strangely he's tilting to the side, making his flight ungraceful and erratic. He jumped off of the truck, and ran ahead towards the Night Fury.

Lohengrin landed in front of him, nowhere near as elegantly as he used to. The dragon cringed and huffed, and because the truck's headlights illuminated the road, he saw dark droplets dripping on the asphalt.

"Lohen!" he exclaimed, and kneeled down in front of him so their eyes can be in level "What happened to you."

The dragon looked at him with his face bearing a world of pain, and heaved:

"Tanks... Ten of them on the highway, escorted by a Gepard. I..." he stopped for a moment, swallowed then went on "I took the Gepard out but not before..."

He unfurled his left wing, to show the four bloody holes torn into the skin.

"Holy crap!" Walther hissed, then gently grabbed the dragon's face with both hands. "Listen... I'll get you outta this. You just have to get on a truck, then we can outrun those bastards..."

"\_No we can't, and you know it.\_ Lohengrin whispered darkly \_They are coming faster than we can move. I can't fly too well, you don't have anti-tank weapons-\_

"As a matter of fact, I do." Walther stood up "But it's not going to help much against ten MBTs... any ideas?"

"\_That air support would be nice.\_ Lohengrin groaned.

Walther grabbed his radio.

"Checkmate, this is Echo Seven-Niner, do you copy?"

"\*\*Solid copy, Seven-Niner."\*\* the response came a few seconds later.

"We have two platoons of MBTs converging on our location, requesting immediate support!"

"\*\*Err... we have ground forces heading your way, and air support will be in position soon. ETA: thirty minutes."\*\*

"Acknowledged. Echo out." Walther lowered his hand, and mumbled to himself: "Sounds pretty close."

"\_Send the civvies forward to meet our guys, and we play rear-guard until air support is online.\_ Lohengrin thought out loud.

"That'll probably be the safest for them." Walther nodded, and swallowed tensely. "This is going to be a wild ride."

The red taillights of the last flatbed disappeared past the curve of the road, leaving one soldier and one Night Fury alone. They were at the outskirts of a small village which was split into two by the road they had to follow south to reach their lines. Before leading, they unloaded whatever military hardware from the trucks which they collected previously, and Walther was nervously eyeing the laughable stockpile they've had.

"Three frag grenades, two flashbangs, a Carl Gustav with four HEAT rounds and another four HE, which is pretty much useless... Some landmines would be great, or a Javelin, or..."

"Or ten more Night Furies, so we could make short work of them." Lohengrin sighed. "Now that we're done with the wishes, what should we actually do? Throw stones at them?"

"Okay, okay, let me think. Let's see... MBTs coming without any support, so they were probably hastily rerouted here to catch us. Because they don't have infantry, they will probably try to go around population centres, as urban territory is great for ambushes... If I were the one leading them, I would leave the road here." He pointed to a spot not far from them. "This path goes around the village, and the tree line offers some cover against flanking fire... I'll rig the HE shells and place them on the road. We'll take up positions in those buildings on the western corner of the village, and wait for them. When they arrive, they'll probably leave the road, right where we want them, and hit them in the sides with everything we've got."

Lohengrin watched closely as Walther carefully placed the shells at spots which he thought the tanks would use, then reluctantly allowed him on his back and ran towards the village. It was completely darkened and silent; the residents were probably evacuated, much to their luck. After encountering a locked door, Walt simply kicked it in, and opened all windows once they were in. The room which looked towards the forest gave them a good enough observation point to see when the enemy tanks will come.

Walther put down the rocket launcher against the wall, and settled down next to it. Lohengrin also laid down, resting his head on his forelegs.

"How's your wing?" Walt asked.

"It'll take a few weeks to heal. If we stay alive for that long, of course."

"Maybe Doctor Miller back at the base can do something with you... she patched me up quite a few times, she's a real miracle-worker."

"I..."

The dragon's earplates twisted, and Walther followed his gaze towards the forest.

The tanks were rolling towards them, one after another. Then they

slowed down and stopped, just as Walther predicted. He quickly grabbed his launcher, and moved into a firing position. Lohengrin ran out of the house, and jumped on the roof, climbing up carefully, and peeking over the top.

"\*\*Stay behind cover, we don't want them to notice us just yet."  
\*\*Walther's calm voice sounded from the radio.

The soldier watched as the tank slowly turned, and left the asphalt for the dirt road, showing its left side to them.

"\*\*FIRE!"\*\* Walther shouted.

Lohengrin quickly stuck his head out of cover, and let loose a fireball. It flew right into the side of the tank, and exploded. But as the flames and smoke died away, he shockingly noticed that the tank was mostly unharmed.

Lohengrin's jaw dropped.

"What in the name of -"

"\*\*Reactive armour!"\*\* Walther exclaimed, and the Carl Gustav thundered on his shoulder, the rocket propelled grenade left the barrel, flew towards the same tank Lohengrin hit, and slammed into its side. It must have penetrated the ammunition racks, as the following gigantic explosion sent the turret flying off, and landing somewhere dozens of metres away.

"FUCK YEAAAH!" he grinned, but the grin quickly melted from his face as he noticed nine 125mm gun barrels turning towards him.

"RUN! Runrunrunrunrun -"

Lohengrin jumped off the roof probably a second before the tanks replied to Walther's shot with a roaring volley fire. Explosive rounds tore into the structure of the building, tearing off the roofing, crushing girders like toothpicks, toppling walls, reducing interior furniture into shattered pieces, fragments of glass and broken tiles flying everywhere.

The explosions caught Walther as he ran out of the house, the blast wave picking him up and throwing into the neighbour's garden. Lohengrin landed a bit more gracefully beside him.

"\_Okay, this didn't work out well.\_ Lohengrin groaned \_"What now?\_"

"Gah... I feel like I broke every single bone of mine..."

"\_Welcome to the club.\_" the dragon growled sourly. The roaring of diesel engines began to come closer. "Where the hell is that triple-damned air sup -"

"\*\*Echo Seven-Niner, this is Sledgehammer. We're on station and awaiting coordinates."\*\*

The short sentence brought new strength into Walther's tired limbs, as he rocketed to his feet, and ran towards the corner of the former building, to peek out on the tanks.

"Sledgehammer, you're our guardian angel today! Targets heading west southwest, half a click from my position, danger close! Nine MBTs, all hostile. Bring down the sky on them!"

"\*\*Solid copy Echo, keep your head down."\*\*

"LOHEN! GET DOWN!" Walther screamed, and hit the deck immediately. Lohengrin crouched low as well, covering his ears with his forelegs, and shutting his eyes tight.

At first, he heard a series of distant "poof" sounds, and another, bigger one. For several seconds it was almost nightmarishly quiet, Lohengrin wondered what sort of pathetic bombs they were using. Then the ground began to tremble underneath him, and wild explosions tore away the darkness, they were bright enough to notice from behind his closed eyelids. Lohengrin felt his ribs vibrating as the onslaught continued, more and more detonations came, until...

Silence. The last explosion died off, and Lohengrin slowly raised his head, to take a look at the tank column.

Except that the tanks were nowhere to be found, along with the tree line next to them, and half of the forest behind them. As he looked up to the sky, he saw nothing at all, which would explain what just happened.

"Walt...?" he asked hoarsely "What the hell was that?"

Walther slowly sat up, and shot a tired grin towards the Night Fury.

"Gunship. AC-130 Spectre. Basically, a transport plane with a bunch of cannons sticking out of its side, design to ruin the day of any poor bastards unlucky enough to be caught in its crosshairs."

"\_Heh... clever.\_ Lohengrin smirked, before lying down on his flank.  
\_"And now if you'll excuse me, I'll wait for the reinforcements to pick us up.\_"

"That's actually..." the soldier sat down beside him "a really nice idea."

\* \* \*

><p>The reckless operation of Walt and Lohen turned out to be a huge success, and its propaganda value was even more significant. But this victory was because of capital insubordination, so Colonel Mertens, Walther's commanding officer had to make a choice: either he tries and dismisses the two from active service and risk public uproar, or... he'll figure something else out.</p>

Two weeks later Walther and Lohengrin found themselves working hard. They had been assigned to dig a multitude of holes for a very "specialised and important purpose." as put by the Colonel. They hadn't rested in hours and still had dozens left to complete. The soldier dug quietly with his shovel while Lohen, inside their pit, tore at the ground flinging dirt and stones everywhere. The Night Fury had not been timid about expressing his opinion on the

matter.

"\_This is the most arbitrary crap I've ever had to do."\_ he fumed.

\_Penalised for saving a hundred civilians... you humans are such idiots sometimes.\_

"Sometimes?" Walther asked.

"\_Okay then, let me correct myself.\_

"Please don't!"

A chuckle escaped Lohen, which he quickly hid to reinforce his bad mood, then took a look at the hole they were digging.

"\_What the heck are we doing, anyway?\_"

"Digging?" Walther asked back.

"\_I mean, what is it for? This looks like a strange place for cover...\_"

"Oh, umm... you don't want to know."

"\_Actually, I do.\_" the dragon stuck his head out of the hole  
\_"You've been hiding this from me the whole time. So I'll ask again:  
what is this hole used for?!\_"

Now the soldier looked quite nervous.

"They're just, in case we... you know... get flanked from here.  
Safety first, hey?" he replied unconvincingly.

"Then why do we have a perfectly fine and operational barricade fifty metres away?"

His plan foiled, Walt looked guiltily down at the ground.

"Crap, uhm... you know... basically, in field camps like this... the soldiers can't afford to look for bushes to... do their business, so..."

"\_WHAT?! WE WERE DOING SHITHOLES THE WHOLE TIME?!\_"

"It's a latrine, Lohen, be professional!"

"\_I'll give you something professional you bare-arsed ape!\_" the dragon roared, and Walther threw his shovel far away as he began to run for his life, laughing madly in the process.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>AN: Phew! A hefty bit of excitement, don't you think?  
:D\*\*

\*\*As always, my dear readers, please tell me what you think. It helps me a lot to go forward.\*\*

\*\*Until next time!\*\*

\*\*I\*\*

\*\*I\*\*

\*\*I\*\*

\*\*V\*\*

## 25. Path of Lies - Chapter 4

\*\*A/N: Okay my dear readers, I owe everyone a HUGE apology. I've had a metric button of real life issues clubbing me in the head, varying from job-related stuff to ankle injuries, but I'm getting back to my old self again. But that's enough of me, let the dragons commence!  
:)\*\*

\* \* \*

><p>Chapter 4.</p>

The sun slowly began to emerge above the horizon, casting brilliant light on the ice and snow covered landscape. The air was cold, fresh, and the offshore breeze gave the air a salty aftertaste. For a few more moments, the eerie silence was very peaceful...

Until sounds of retching shattered it into pieces.

"\_Here you go.\_ Lenhardt smiled as he backed away from the pile of half-digested fish he just coughed up.

"\_Thanks pal, I was out fetching stuff for Elder Tamaana all night, I'm so dead.\_ Wyren sighed tiredly, and then hungrily sunk his teeth into the first fish. After some tasting and munching, he spoke up:

"\_It tastes... unusual. Salty, maybe?"\_

"\_I know.\_ Lenny confirmed \_Elder Ragnar said it's normal for this area. This place is supposed to be an island, and the water around here is called 'sea', whatever that means.\_"

"\_I don't get this.\_ Wyren mumbled between two fish \_"Why is water salty at one place, and not at the other?"\_

"\_I have no clue.\_ Lenny shook his head \_"And I'm afraid to ask Elder Ragnar, because if he knows, he's going to interpret it for days. But he did warn not to drink seawater, because it only makes us more thirsty.\_"

"\_Yeah, right.\_ Wyren grinned as he finished eating. \_"How long are we going to stay here?"\_

Lenny turned his head to the west, and just stared for a few seconds before answering:

"\_We'll head out tonight. We're close now, a few more days and this wandering is over.\_"

"\_And then, we're at our new home... which will be safe,

right?"\_\_

Lenhardt swallowed tensely at this. He had no idea; he only knew that the Menaedhral Mountains are supposed to be safe. But nobody, not even his father knew what exactly would await them, once they get there.

"\_Sure. It'll be safe." \_He replied hesitantly.

"\_Well, that would be a nice change."\_ Wyren commented \_\_"After all this running around and seeing weird places, I'm longing for some mountains again. You sure you're okay?"\_\_

The sudden change of subject caught Lenny off guard.

"\_Y-yeah, why?" he blinked.

"\_Dunno, you seem particularly morose and serious all the time..."\_ Wyren observed with narrowed eyes \_\_"I can't even remember the last time we went out to just have fun."\_\_

"\_I don't really have time to goof around anymore, Ren."\_ Lenhardt stated.

"\_This is exactly what I'm talking about!"\_ Wyren cried out \_\_"You would have never even considered saying something like that two months ago! I've had enough of your 'leader' crap for a lifetime. You need to chill out!"\_\_

Lenny rolled his eyes while his friend bit down on the tail of another fish.

"\_Ren, with all the stuff going around, how can you expect me to not be serio-\_"

SLAP.

Wet and slimy fish collided with his face, and he jumped back in surprise. Wyren got on all fours with the fish still hanging out of his mouth, and with a playful glimmer in his eyes.

"\_Wyren, don't-\_"

SLAP.

"\_I'm gonna hit you until you start acting like you used to!"\_ Wyren grinned, the fish between his teeth swinging back and forth."

"\_Quit annoying me-\_"

SLAP.

"\_Okay." Lenny sighed. \_\_"Let's just sit back, and think this over..."\_\_

The fish spanned through the air with negligent elegance, landing on the top of his head with a wet smack, and slowly slid downwards to cover his right eye.

"\_I'M GONNA SHOVE THIS INTO YOUR-\_"

The rest of Lenhardt's swearing was cut off by the mad laughter of his friend. Wyren quickly jumped into the air, tail-fin butting Lenny's head gently as he flew away. Lenny shook the fish off his head, and leapt into the air to follow him.

\* \* \*

><p>By the time Lenhardt and Wyren got back to the rest of the clan, the sun was probably at its highest point. It was hard to tell, because the sky was made dark and murky by the brewing blizzard. Despite the howling wind and falling snow, most of the Furies were trying to sleep, gathering strength for the next night-time flight towards their destination.</p>

Lenny himself was about to curl up beside his mother, when he heard someone calling his name, outshouting the wind. As he turned towards the direction where the call came from, he saw Second Guard Arnavyr giving him an expecting look. He motioned with his head to come closer, and Lenny complied with rising curiosity.

"\_Excuse me Lenhardt" \_the older dragon began \_"But it seems like we have a rather... delicate situation you need to know about."\_

"\_What's wrong?"\_ Lenny asked.

Arnavyr took a deep breath before answering.

"\_Follow me. We've found something unnerving around the reserve fish-piles."\_

Lenny took a sharp breath. Piling up some fish at each stopping point was his mother's idea, in order to prevent populous flocks of Furies flying around the hiding place. The reserves are supposed to help feed those who can't go on hunting for their own, but as it turned out, the amount of food the hunters were able to collect during their short time was barely enough to keep them from starvation. Everyone had to constantly endure a varying measure of hunger all the time, so any kind of problems regarding the already scarce food was indeed a serious issue.

\_Lenny swallowed tensely, then said:\_

"\_Let's go."\_

They both flew to the place where the Hunters kept the food. Usually, nobody approached the fish pile alone as anyone who happened to be hungry asked a Hunter first. If the Hunter confirmed that there was available food, the hungry one was escorted here, fed, and escorted away. This was a complicated system, but it worked well and nobody had experienced any problems with it... until now.

On arrival, Lenny immediately noticed the myriad of footprints littering the area around the mound of fish. The weather made it impossible to make out what had made them. Only rough outlines of a paw-like shape remained.

"\_Half the stockpile is gone."\_ Arnavyr said, his tone full of angst.

"\_And these prints?"\_ Lenny motioned towards the tracks surrounding it, \_"tell me they're yoursâ€|" \_

"\_I'm afraid not, at least not the majority of them. I tried to follow but they stop around... here." He gestured toward the ending of the line of pawprints. "Which means whatever they are, they can fly. It must be other dragons."\_

"\_This could be really bad."\_ Lenny said, shaking his head in disbelief\_ "There's enough here to suggest they have a force of... I don't know, fifteen? Twenty?" \_

"\_One dragon could likely cause several sets of prints by himself, and if there were twenty dragons they would have taken everything, I'd guess perhaps six or seven."\_ Arnavyr explained.

"\_What about their scent?"\_

"\_About thatâ€| take a close sniff of the tracks here."\_ the Second Guard said, motioning towards a particular set of prints with his nose."

Lenny lowered his head to take a close look and sniff the strange pawprints. Something felt odd with them, but it took a few moments for young Night Fury to realize what's wrong. After a bit more sniffing around, he looked at Arnavyr.

"\_The scent of the owner..."\_

"\_...is nowhere to be found."\_ Arnavyr nodded. \_"In fact, I can't find any scents at any pawprints. Which means whoever came here took a fire bath before it. The only reason to do that is to conceal identity."\_

"\_The clever bastards."\_ Lenny huffed.

"\_Looks like they have experience in stealing from others..."\_ The Guard said darkly \_"This is probably the most indistinguishable pile of tracks I've ever seen. The pawprints look somewhat similar to a Night Furies, but they are too long. There are also other tracks here which don't even look like paw-marks at all. The snowstorm doesn't help either, it's a damn mess."\_

"\_You're right."\_ Lenhardt mumbled as he examined the tracks again  
\_"Did anyone else have an idea of what they might be?"\_

"\_Nobody else knows, I came straight to you. Wouldn't want to start rumours and get everyone to panic." \_Arnavyr shook his head.\_

"\_Smart. Then, what do you think?"\_

The older dragon let out an angered huff, the more he looked at the mystery he couldn't solve, the more irritated he seemed.

"\_I'm not sure; I can't make out a lot from this."\_ Arnavyr began  
\_"My first thought was Skrills, but that doesn't seem likely. I mean, they would've attacked us or taken the whole pile. Maybe there is another kind of dragon living here we've never seen before. Whatever

it was they just wanted the food, they got in and out in total silence. "\_

"\_Right.\_ Lenny thought out loud \_"I'll go and talk to Salko, if we are being trailed, we'll have to be on utmost alert. And we'll have to double the patrols." \_He took a deep breath before going on \_"I want to get to the bottom of this." \_

"\_We have to, and soon." \_Arnavyr said darkly \_"Because if these guys decide that they're interested in more than food, we're in deep trouble." \_

\* \* \*

><p>The easiest way for a clan of fifty Night Furies to stay undetected during travel, was to simply climb above cloud level. It was also nice to get out of the snowstorm, up here; they had no other company but the myriad of stars and the lone moon above them. Plus the cold wind, but it was manageable. Every once in a while, Lenny and a few Guards dived down to check on the landscape; but they were above the sea for hours, with the shores nowhere to be seen in the darkness of the cloudy winter night. This gave Lenny a strange feeling inside as they flew; there's nothing above them, nothing under them, and nothing around them...</p>

Suddenly the feelings caused by the empty, black scenery dawned on him. It felt hard to admit to himself, but he felt badly homesick. So far he had never actually realised how much he missed the mountains, rivers, lush forests, the Great Aspen in the middle of valley...

To dodge his incoming bad mood, he began to edge towards First Guard Salkonyr, who flew beside him.

"Please take my place for a bit, Salko." He asked quietly. The older Fury nodded, and with a few strong wingbeats, he occupied the leading point in the formation.

Lenny did a lazy circle and flew above the flock of dragons, just for the sake of checking up on everyone. Elder Tamaana wasn't too hard to spot, her silver-stained wings were visible even in such dark conditions. However, as Lenny observed, she looked like she was working harder than usual to stay in formation. Immersed in her own thoughts, as she didn't even notice that a young Night Fury slowly glided next to her.

"\_Elder Tamaana?"\_ Lenny called her quietly.

"\_Oh. Good evening, Lenhardt, can I help you with something?"\_

"\_Nothing special. I just thought about asking how you are."\_

"\_I would prefer to leave the title of 'The Oh So Complaining One' to Elder Ragnar, but I am really not much of a fan of these long, all-night flights. I hope we are getting near to our destination."\_

"\_We are." \_Lenny confirmed \_"We should reach the great mountain range in the west in two or three nights. Then we just have to find a comfortable spot, and we can rest."\_

"\_Well, that would be nice.\_" Tamaana smiled \_"I am getting tired of listening to the cracking of my joints for hours long.\_"

"\_Oh come on!"\_ Lenny chuckled \_"You don't even seem that old to me.\_"

"\_That's very kind of you to say"\_ the old dragoness smiled gratefully at him \_"but you would be surprised. Let me just say that I am way past my years of enjoying all-night flights.\_"

"\_Why, how old are you exactly?"\_ Lenny asked, ears perking up in curiosity.

Elder Tamaana giggled and shook her head before beginning to answer.

"\_I would like to let you know that this is not exactly a polite thing to ask from a dragoness.\_"

"\_Oh.\_" Lenny blushed \_"I-I'm sorry...\_"

"\_Nothing happened.\_" she smiled leniently \_"The good Elder Ragnar always likes to boast about how old he is; let me tell you, just between the two of us, that I remember times when Ragnar was just a tiny hatchling, complaining about why he has to eat carp instead of trout.\_"

Lenny felt his jaw drop.

"\_Really?"\_

"\_Oh yes.\_" Elder Tamaana nodded \_"I have seen the hatching of every single Night Fury of this clan, and I intend to see a few more before reuniting with my loved ones on the Starpath.\_"

Lenny cringed and stayed silent for a while, thinking over the Elder's words. What can it be like, living past everyone you grew up with, watching friends pass away due to old age? Seeing several hundred winters, watching other dragons hatch, grow up, and maybe even die?

"\_I know what you are thinking.\_" Tamaana spoke up, interrupting the young Fury's thoughts. \_"No matter how hard it is to endure, letting go is just a part of life, just as much as hatching. I have had a long life, and I have had my fair share of both happiness, and grief. But in the end, all that matters is that you are content with the way you spent the time that was given; and I am. If you only take one piece of advice from me, young lad, let it be this: always try to arrange your life in a way which makes you content with it. So when your time comes, you can look back and be completely in peace.\_"

\* \* \*

><p>By the end of the night, the clan left the vicinity of the sea, and much to everyone's delight, they arrived to a huge pine forest, which was dotted by many lakes. The place looked comfortable, and the vague lights to the north and south indicated that human dwellings are also quite far away. This place finally offered some shelter against the still ongoing snowstorm, and the dozens of lakes promised

ample food, something which they really lacked since the beginning of their migration.<p>

Once they found a clearing in the forest to touch down in, Lenhardt, with the help of his mother and First Guard Salkonyr, began the usual routine of sorting out Guard patrol duty, organising hunting trips, checking the well-being of everyone. He talked with Salkonyr about Arnavyr's findings, and decided to quietly put all Guards on higher alert, but otherwise wait and see, not wanting to spread panic among the rest of the Night Furies. Should someone try to steal food or just generally pay them a visit, they will be ready this time.

Now that the clan took security precautions, Lenny still wanted to figure out a way to catch the thieves. As hard as he could, he could not figure out how so many potential threats had slipped past unnoticed. Then he decided to ask the only person whom he could trust with this matter.

He quickly took off, getting above the trees with quick wing beats. As he flew back towards the clearing, he spotted Lyara lying under a tree. He did a sharp turn, and gently landed a few steps away from her, then stopped. His mother was hunting overtime during the last couple days to help feed the clan, so Lenny wasn't surprise to see her try to get some rest. Not wanting to wake her up, he began to backtrack, but as soon as he moved, Lyara stirred and opened her eyes, taking a drowsy look at her son.

"\_Hi..." \_Lenny smiled at her sheepishly\_ "Sorry, I didn't want to wake you up."\_

"\_Oh, never mind."\_ Lyara said with a yawn \_"It's not like I can actually sleep well anyway. So I might as well do something useful with my time."\_ she continued, stretching her legs and wings out wide before sitting up.

"\_I suppose you didn't come to just say hi."\_ She smiled.

"\_Ehm, no."\_ Lenny admitted. Then, he quickly described this apparent thief-situation and the things he had learned about it from Arnavyr. While he was talking, all traces of sleepiness vanished from Lyara's features, replaced by curiosity and a hint of fear.

"\_So I don't really know how should I figure this out..."\_

"\_This is unnerving, to say the least.\_" \_Lyara said in a concerned tone \_"Even if there are only five of them\_, \_\_if they can sneak past the guards while the others are sleeping..."\_ She stopped for a moment and took a deep breath. Panic would only make the situation worse. \_"But still, I agree with waiting and seeing. There is also a chance that what happened at our previous stop was a local thing. No need to assume the worst-"\_

She was interrupted by Arnavyr, who hastily landed beside Lenhardt.

"\_There it is again!" \_he gabbled nervously\_ "Half of the fish are missing, and there's a haywire of tracks around the pile again. Salkonyr is already there, investigating with half a dozen Guards."\_

Lenny and Lyara exchanged a scared look, then quickly took off, following Arnavyr to the scene.

They arrived to see a very angry Salkonyr, in the company of six other Guards, who were in the process of carefully sniffing and examining the strange trails, disclosing theories and suspicions between each other.

"\_This has to stop!"\_ Salkonyr fumed. He felt personally offended by the fact that someone managed to slip past his patrols. Let alone what appeared to be an entire party of offenders,\_ "Lenhardt, let me organize a sweeping party, I want to check the area to the south. Not much can be made out of the tracks, but we suspect that someone headed south from here. We might find some obvious hiding places."\_

"\_What if you find any?" \_Lenny asked.

"\_Then we'll storm it."\_ Salkonyr said darkly. \_"And drag out the culprits."\_

"\_I don't like this at all." \_Lenny said worriedly \_"We don't know who, what, or how many we're up against..."\_

"\_If these are Skrills, we have to act before they do."\_

Lenhardt gritted his teeth as he stared at his forepaws. Now, he was officially scared. The last time his clan clashed with Skrills was a long time ago, yet he still heard the stories about it. Stories about fierce battles, serious injuries, torn families... Life-long scars which many had to bear, including his father.

"\_Okay."\_ he finally blurted out, still looking at his paws \_"Go out with six Guards and search the area, but if you find anything, give us a signal and wait for reinforcements. In the meantime, Arnavyr and I will rally the others and be on standby. As soon as you give the signal, we'll go in."\_ he stopped to raise his head and look Salkonyr in the eye before continuing:

"\_And give our new neighbours a fiery welcome."\_

\* \* \*

><p>Cold night fell on the winter forest, which became almost silent. The only sound audible in the forest was the hooting of owls, and of course, the puffs of wind.</p>

The whole clan sat in a circle, listening quietly as Lenhardt explained the situation to them. But as he did so, Lenny could not miss the traces of disappointment in the fearful glares of the others. Suddenly, he felt like a filthy liar; he was supposed to lead them to safety, not into... \_this.\_

But he had one more announcement to make.

"\_Because of the seriousness of the situation"\_ he began \_"I decided to personally lead our Guards against the threat. There is a good chance the situation can be resolved in a peaceful way; but if not, we will strike first, and strike hard! I will not stand for any threats against the well-being of our clan!"\_

The agreeing and appreciating roars managed to lighten up the mood a bit, but Lenny just had to look on his mother's face to see that she was not happy with his decision. Not in the slightest.

"\_Lenhardt, you better get this out of your head!"\_ She said strictly after they managed to find a place where they could talk privately.

"\_No.\_ he assessed.

"\_What is it with your father's bloodâ€¢?\_" She sighed, "You always want to risk yourselves without a care in the world for the ones who love you. Please, Lenny you're still young. Nobody is expecting you to-\_"

"\_I'm not just a Leader by title!"\_ Lenhardt spoke up \_"Dad would lead them personally; I have to do so as well! What kind of leader would I be if I would cower under your wing after I ordered the Guards to risk their lives?"\_

"\_See? That's exactly what your father would have said, except he is the best trained fighter this clan! It's commendable that you want to replace him, but there is no comparison between the two of you!"\_

For a few moments, Lenhardt just blinked, and Lyara immediately regretted what she just said.

"\_Lenny-\_"

"\_Well, thanks for the vote of confidence. I've always loved living in his shadow"\_ Lenhardt said coldly \_"Now if you excuse me, I have an attack to set up."\_

Ignoring his mother's tearful glare, he turned and walked away silently.

\* \* \*

><p>A blue and red fireball appeared high on the sky. Twelve Guards were in full alert, ready to meet the unknown threat. Lenny turned his head towards Second Guard Arnavyr, and nodded.</p>

"\_Let's head out."\_

"\_Formation!"\_ Arnavyr yelled, and all of them took off, forming a wide 'V' as they began their flight southwards, in order to meet up with Salkonyr and his vanguard force.

Lyara watched silently as they disappeared into the clouds, and let out a shaky sigh. Everywhere she looked, she could only see tense Furies trying to act calmly. Only six Guards could remain here to keep the others safe, and they had to be supplemented by able-bodied Hunters, due to their losses at Toemnir valley. The air itself seemed to vibrate of tension.

"\_Lyara?\_"

She turned around, to see Ohrana approaching her. The former huntress

walked with careful steps, and Lyara's heart was immediately filled with pity as she saw the one-eyed dragoness.

"\_Hi.\_" Lyara greeted her.

"\_I'd like to ask what you know about this mess..."\_ the older dragoness began "\_This whole 'be ready for anything and we may have a fight at paw'\_\_thing came practically out of nowhere."\_

"\_It pretty much did."\_ Lyara replied in a shaky tone \_"A few days ago, the Guards spotted strange pawprints around the food reserves. They were so messy, they couldn't figure out what left them there. Whatever they were, they've followed us and stolen fish again. Salko's suspecting Skrills."\_

Ohrana swallowed, and stayed silent for a moment.

"\_Can I see those tracks?"\_

"\_Err... sure, why not.\_" Lyara stuttered.

The two Night Furies flew to the spot in the forest, where the food reserves were piled up. They were both silent on the way, but Lyara figured out why Ohrana wanted to take a look at the scene. She heard from Elder Tamaana, that after a permanent eye injury, the other senses are trying to compensate... which means Ohrana should have better hearing and sense of smell than any other Night Furies!

"\_Why haven't I thought about this sooner?!"\_ she cried out loud.

"\_What?"\_ Ohrana asked, veering closer to her.

"\_Nothin'.\_" Lyara mumbled awkwardly. \_"We're here, go on and take a look at it as you wish."\_

They arrived to the scene, and Ohrana immediately began to curiously examine the pawprints and other marks in the snow.

"\_I've never seen anything like this before...\_" she commented, and began to carefully sniff one of the pawprints. But she almost immediately recoiled, shook her head, and began to sniff again, as if she didn't want to believe what she had found.

Lyara narrowed her eyes and took a few steps closer to her.

"\_Ohrana, what's-\_"

"\_Where are the Guards going?!"\_ Ohrana cried out, with an unnerving amount of urgency in her voice.

"\_They must've found something like a cave, or hideout to the south, and-\_"

As she heard this, Ohrana rapidly leapt into the air.

"\_We have to tell them to stop!\_"

"\_What?!"\_ Lyara cried out desperately "\_Ohrana, wait, what's going

on?!" -

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Oh, what a cheeky bastard am I for ending a two-months-late chapter with a cliffhanger? :D<br>\*\*

\*\*Don't worry ladies and gents, you all have my word that the next chapter WILL NOT take two months to get done. Also, a HUGE thank you goes to my trusty Aussie minion, this chapter would not be possible without him. So girls, send kisses, boys, send beers to TheWopolusa for his astounding contribution!\*\*

\*\*I have so many contributors now, I'm going to have to write a "Credits" chapter at the end of the story...\*\*

\*\*Which I think it's great, by the way. :D\*\*

\*\*As always, comment, review, share your opinions with me. It's worth more than you think. Until next time!

o/\*\*

\*\*I\*\*

\*\*I\*\*

\*\*I\*\*

\*\*V\*\*

## 26. Path of Lies - Chapter 5

\*\*A/N: Oh my God, this took me a while. But I at least have some good news... In my usual end-chapter AN. Onwards to read! :)\*\*

\* \* \*

><p>Chapter Five<p>

He was dreaming again.

Now with a full belly and a freshly found comfortably leeward place to hide and lie down. He finally had the opportunity to sink down into the warm depths of relaxing illusions, where none of his fears or sorrow mattered anymore. He had not been able to sleep peacefully for many months, and he had almost forgotten how nice it was to just forget everything and drift away.

But his dreams came to an abrupt end. As his eyes snapped open his senses tingled with danger he quickly jumped onto all fours, with narrowed eyes and perked-up ears looked at the mouth of the small cave he had bunkered himself in. For a few tense moments, he couldn't hear, smell, or see anything suspicious or dangerous, so he let out a breath of relief.

In that exact moment, fireballs began to swarm his cavern.

Blindingly bright, blue and purple balls of flame were hitting the

walls and the ceiling with deep and loud thuds. They came like an angry swarm of hornets, and before he could even think about hiding, a fireball hit him in the chest.

Of course his scales protected him from most of the intense heat, which otherwise would have caused serious or even lethal burns to its victim, but he had no protection against the impact of it. The sheer force of the hit smashed him against the cave wall half a dozen steps behind, knocking the air out of his lungs. The frenzy of fireballs continued as he tried to shake the dizziness out of his head, when another fireball came, hitting him in the chin.

As he blacked out, he thought that those few fish were about to cost him a lot more than they were worth.

\* \* \*

><p>"<em>Cease fire!"<em>

A dozen Guards stopped shooting fireballs at once, and for the moment, the only movement around was the thin trail of smoke seeping out of the narrow crevice in the hillside in front of them. The barely detectable scent of some kind of dragon led Salkonyr to strongly believe that the thieves were certain to be inside this cave, and had ordered his fellow Guards to take up a semi-circle formation, twenty steps from the entrance, and fire a continuous volley of low-powered fireballs inside. The blasts weren't strong enough to collapse the cave or kill any dragons, but they definitely packed enough punch to knock someone out with a direct hit.

"\_You think that was enough?" \_Lenhardt asked tensely.

"\_This is how we ask nicely to come out."\_ Salkonyr growled. \_"If they resist, we'll take a more direct approach.\_"

"\_Alright! Raylandt, Selara, Howninn, Tharauk! You four take up position at the entrance, and on my mark, you—

"\_STOP!"\_

The angry and desperate cry came from above, and within a few seconds, Lenny saw his mother and Ohrana touching down between the Guards and the cave entrance. Salkonyr stepped forward to question them.

"\_Don't interfere with-\_

"\_Shut up you impatient fool and listen to what I have to say!"\_ Ohrana yelled, earning disturbed glances from the Night Furies around her. \_"Your lack of common sense is astounding, whose genius idea was to shoot first and ask questions later?! Did any of you even try to identify the thief before shooting him to pieces?!"\_

"\_What the... who is 'him'?!" \_Salkonyr asked back angrily \_"The tracks clearly showed that there are more than-\_"

Not even bothering to listen to the First Guard, Ohrana rushed into the cave.

"\_Wait!"\_ Salkonyr yelled, and ran after her. But before he could

enter, Ohrana appeared again, carrying a limp, obviously unconscious form on her back.

"\_THIS is your wild pack of dangerous thieves.\_" \_She said coldly.  
\_"One lonely, injured \_\_\*\*Night Fury youngling!\*\*\_\_"-

Lenny felt his jaw drop at the sight. Ohrana was right, there was a young Night Fury on her back, who looked maybe a few years older than him. Realization struck him like lightning, that he almost committed a fatal mistake, and quite easily could've caused the death of a fellow dragon. The rest of the guards looked just as flabbergasted, especially Salkonyr.

"\_But... but-\_

"We have to take him to Elder Tamaana, and fast." Ohrana stated calmly. "\_I am sure he tried to conceal his identity by taking a fire bath and making lots of false paw prints, because he had no idea what to expect from us. And he did a darn great job at that.\_"

"\_Resume the standard patrol schedule. We'll discuss what comes next tomorrow.\_" Salkonyr sighed, turning towards the rest of the Guards. The crowd slowly began to dissolve, and most of the dragons took off. Ohrana began to jog towards the clan's place, as she could not fly with another dragon on her back, and Salkonyr accompanied her.

Everyone left the scene, except Lyara and Lenny, who still refused to look into his mother's eyes. Lyara swallowed tensely, and began to move toward her trembling son.

"\_Lenny...\_-

"\_You were right.\_" he spoke up in a bitter tone \_"I'm a complete idiot.\_"

"\_No, you're not\_-"

"\_I almost got him killed!"\_ Lenny cried out, tears of shame beginning to trail down his cheeks \_"I almost had a Night Fury executed because I didn't have the brain to ask Ohrana, who has the best nose in the whole clan! She could have solved this whole issue within seconds, sparing everyone from stress and drama, but no, I went full retard and began preparing for... I don't know, full-scale war!\_"

"\_Son.\_" \_Lyara began softly, in a soothing tone that only a mother can muster \_"You saw the clues and drew the wrong conclusions. That can happen with anyone, I cannot name one Night Fury who never made a mistake once, not even your father.\_" \_she nuzzled her son, throwing a wing across his back to hug him tightly. \_"Luckily for everyone, nobody was seriously harmed today; I'm sure Elder Tamaana will patch our guest up in no time.\_"

"\_I don't know, I just feel like this is too much for me..." \_Lenny mumbled, burying his face into his mother's neck.

"\_Of course it is.\_" Lyara answered \_"Nobody should bear your burden at your age. But with experiences like this, you will get the wisdom you need over time. We commit mistakes so we can learn from them,

this was one tough lesson you won't forget."\_

"\_That's true."\_ Lenny whispered.

"\_You're a clever boy, Lenny, I know that you learned what you had to from this. Don't judge yourself too hard because you were not right this time; imagine how Salko feels for example. Because of what happened to us back home, everyone is afraid, and trying to be cautious."\_

Lenhardt took a shaky breath, and stayed silent for a moment, letting his mother's words sink in. He still felt terrible for almost killing the stray Night Fury, but deep inside, he was very grateful for Lyara's words, and honest show of believing in him.

"\_Okay."\_ He finally said \_"Let's just... go back and see how our guest is. I would like to ask him some questions, when he feels well enough to talk."\_

"\_He indeed has a lot of explaining to do."\_ Lyara smiled, releasing her son from the hug \_"Let's go.\_"

\* \* \*

><p>By the time Lenny and Lyara got to the spot where Elder Tamaana usually dwelled, they found the old dragoness already being very busy with the newfound young dragon. He was still unconscious, laying on his back, wings spread wide as the healer thoroughly checked him out, like leaning to his chest to listen his heartbeat, opening his mouth to peek inside, and so on.</p>

But at least now Lenny had the opportunity to take a good look at the lone Night Fury. To say he looked battered was an understatement. His scales were riddled with scratches and bruises, and by the looks of it, he didn't really bother keeping himself clean. That seemed understandable, because he was so thin, the outline of his ribs were visible. He probably starved for a long time before finding Clan Toemnir.

"\_So, how is he?"\_ Lenny asked quietly.

Elder Tamaana gave him a somewhat grumpy look before answering.

"\_He took a big knock to the head, but thankfully, nothing major. He is quite underdeveloped for his age but eating frequently will change that. His left foreleg however, is more worrying.\_"

All three dragons leaned closer to the mentioned limb. Only now did Lenny realize that two of the claws were missing out of the four, along with a portion of his paw.

"\_Looks like a bear bite to me."\_ Lyara commented with narrowed eyes.

"\_I agree. His ankle was also broken at some point, and it healed badly. I am pretty sure he limps heavily on this leg.\_"

"\_That's another explanation to the weird paw prints in the snow.\_" Lenny thought out loud.

"\_And it also explains why he is so underfed."\_ Tamaana added \_"He simply cannot stalk any prey for a long period of time, not with this leg.\_"

"\_It's a miracle he even survived this long."\_ Lyara gulped.

"\_Well, his life will be easier if he stays with usâ€œ! Will he?"\_ Tamaana asked, looking at Lenny.

"\_I, uhhâ€œ| I haven't quite figured out what we should do with himâ€œ| though I'm not against taking him in, if he wishes."\_ Lenny said.

"Alright then. Stand back a bit, I am going to wake him up."

"\_Just like that?"\_ Lenny asked in surprise as he and his mother took a few steps backwards.

"\_Watch and learn, young one."\_ the Elder chuckled, and leaned close to the unconscious youngling. Their foreheads touched, then Lenny could faintly hear a few quiet and unfamiliar words:

"\_Aebredj, fyathal sharkainn.\_"

Much to the surprise of Lenny and Lyara, the thin Night Fury let out a groan, and slowly rolled to his right side.

"\_What the fâ€œ! Magic?!"\_ Lenhardt stared at Elder Tamaana, who just chuckled again and shook her head."

"\_Do not be silly, of course not. But I find I can focus a lot better if I express myself in the Old Tongue.\_"

"\_Was this the mind-thingy Dad mentioned once?"\_ Lenny asked, turning to his mother, who was looking at the old dragoness with a newfound respect.

"\_I guess it was, Lenny. I guess it was.\_"

Elder Tamaana just winked at them mischievously.

In the meantime, the young Night Fury on the ground moaned again, and slowly opened his eyes.

"\_Ow my headâ€œ| ehhhâ€œ| oh crap.\_"

"\_Easy there young lad, you are safe."\_ Tamaana said to him reassuringly, as she watched him slowly sit up and shooting nervous glances at the dragons around him.

"\_U-huh. Rrriight.\_ He mumbled and shook his head, visibly straining to collect himself. \_"Whâ€œ! Where the heck am I?"\_

"\_Remember the clan you stalked?" \_Lenny asked in a chatting tone.

It took a few moments of thinking for the dragon to realize what Lenny is talking about.

"\_Heheâ€|" he snickered nervously \_"Well, this is awkward."\_  
"\_It is." Lenny agreed \_"When you feel well enough, I would like to ask a few questions."\_

"\_Alrightâ€| I guess. Uhmâ€|" he gave an awkward grin with ears flattening to his head \_"I know this is one fucked-up-"  
—

"\_Language!" Lyara snapped.

"\_Sorry. I know thisâ€| isn't the best way to introduce myself, butâ€| justâ€| call me Dyner, okay?"\_

"\_Sure."\_ Lenny nodded, trying to appear friendly to ease the tension. \_"We'll talk tomorrow, Dyner."\_

\* \* \*

><p>The next morning, Lenny went to meet with Dyner again, and on the way, two other Night Furies joined. First came Ohrana, because she was worried about Dyner's well-being. Lenny found the half-eyed dragoness' interest a bit surprising at first, then he figured that she probably feels some kind of companionship with the newcomer, given the fact that both of them were sort-of cripples.</p>

The second one was Salkonyr, who was still somewhat ashamed and angered by Dyner's acts of deception. And he also wanted to question the young dragon, probably to see it for himself if he is a threat to the clan, or not.

As they approached Elder Tamaana's place, the old dragoness came forward, exchanging greetings with the three Night Furies.

"\_How's Dyner doing?"\_ Lenny asked.

"\_He is fine. A bit anxious about today, nothing serious." \_The healer replied, and walked on to commence with her daily routine. Lenny, Ohrana and Salko went on towards the tiny glade, and found Dyner quietly sitting under a tall pine.

"\_Ooh, what a nice welcoming committee."\_ He grinned nervously as he saw the three dragons approaching him.

"\_Not so much." \_Salkonyr growled quietly, earning a warning nudge from Lenny.

"\_Slept well?"\_ Lenny asked politely.

"\_I guess. Nobody shot me in the head this time."\_ Dyner grinned, but his smile began to fade as he noticed Salko's dark glare.

"\_I think we could start with you telling a bit about yourself."\_ Lenny went on, ignoring Salkonyr's irritation.

Dyner frowned, then took a deep breath.

"\_Alright."\_ he huffed. \_"My name is Dyner, son of Teague. Iâ€| I left my clanâ€| They originally lived far eastwards from here, butâ€| so life was pretty bad, and I had no reasons to stay." He looked up

to meet Lenny's eyes before going on "I travelled west for a long time, but eventually food became scarce in around the areas I was."—

"\_So when you discovered our tracks, you decided to tail us."\_ Salkonyr scowled.

"\_Who pissed on your morning fish, buddy?"\_ Dyner asked him with a cocky glare.

Salko looked like he's about to blow up, so Lenny quickly stepped forward to be in between the two dragons before something bloody would happen.

"\_This is First Guard Salkonyr, he is responsible for the protection of our clan."\_ Lenny described \_"And he doesn't like being fooled."—

"\_Oops. Uhmm! Sorry?"—

"\_Listen here, you sly dipshit. "\_Salkonyr began slowly in a threatening tone \_"You've got exactly ten seconds to give me reasons why I shouldn't scale you for shortening our fish supplies!"—

"\_I didn't really have much of a choice!" \_Dyner explained defensively \_"And it was only temporary, until I can find a better place. I tried asking help from others during my travels, the best I got was a kick in the butt to get lost. I decided to stay safe, and that's so I made all those fake paw prints and stuff. I didn'tâ€œ think it would cause that much of a commotion, soâ€œ I apologize."—

Salkonyr let out an angry huff.

"\_You better behave yourself. I'll be watching you."—

With that, he turned and took off, leaving them on the glade.

"\_I guess I kinda pissed him off."\_ Dyner commented as he watched the furious Guard leave.

"\_Sure did, though it's not exactly hard to do these days."\_ Lenny confirmed, letting a slight grin escape him \_"Anyway, I'd also like to introduce our top hunting instructor, Ohrana. She was the one who figured you were on your own, and stopped us from blasting you."—

"\_I can honestly say I'm thankful for that." \_Dyner smiled at the older dragoness \_"I have a vague memory of the firepower I received."—

"\_I'm glad I could help."\_ Ohrana nodded, returning his smile. \_"Next time however, please be so kind and not freak us all out by feigning a Skrill attack or something, right?"—

"\_I guess I can manage that."\_ Dyner laughed, shaking his head. After the laughter died down, he looked at Lenhardt again. \_"Can I ask you something?"—

"\_Sure."—

"\_What's a whole clan doing out here, travelling for so long?"\_

"\_That's a thing I wanted to talk to you about. How well do you know the area around us?"\_

"\_Relatively well.\_" Dyner answered \_"I've spent a few days in the mountain range to the west a good while ago, I only went away to explore a bit. In fact, I was trying to head back, but first I got grounded by a heavy snowstorm, then I found you guys."\_

"\_Perfect.\_" Lenny nodded. \_"Y'know, we are searching for a new home. You could use some company. So if you know a place which would be nice for a clan of Night Furies, and lead us there, I'll take you in to our clan, or let you stay with us for as long as you wish."\_

"\_\*\*You'd\*\* take me in?" Dyner asked in disbelief. \_"I thought that's a privilege of a Leader or something!"\_

"\_I am Lenhardt, son of Lohengrin, acting Leader of Clan Toemnir.\_" Lenny stood up and took on a stance of authority. \_"So, what's your answer?"\_

It took Dyner a good few seconds to overcome his astonishment. But eventually, he did.

"\_Iâ€| uhmâ€| alright, sure!"\_

\* \* \*

><p>Lenny decided to keep the newcomer Night Fury's involvement in the search for new home a secret, at least for a while. He thought it would be a bit too much to expect everyone to not only accept a sneaky thief into their ranks but follow his lead as well. He was sure in Dyner's harmless intentions, but convincing everyone else, especially Salkonyr proved to be a challenge.</p>

While the younger dragons found him funny and fun to hang out with, the older ones found his cheeky attitude rather irritating. He even managed to get an angry look from Elder Ragnar sometimes, which counted as utterly uncontrollable, frothy rage from him.

But to Dyner's credit, he tried his best not to be dead weight, just another mouth to feed. He volunteered to be tried out in a number of roles, to see where he could be the most useful... although sometimes those trials were less than successful. Once, he tried to fetch a specific tree bark for Elder Tamaana. He quickly found in the woods what he was looking for, but at first he didn't notice the rather bad-looking mushroom growing on the other side of tree's bole... So he had to discover that his body reacts quite violently to that kind of mushroom. He spent the rest of his day with an extremely runny nose and face so swollen one could barely tell the difference between his nose and eyes, earning disgusted looks from older dragons, and screams of terror from young ones.

\* \* \*

><p>Trying to feed a whole clan while they're on the move, and barely

have time to actually hunt because the hunters need to rest for next day's migration made things quite stressful. There were days when the catch was so scarce, only the younglings got anything to eat, and the others had to wait for the new day and new hunting grounds to get something. So when Macharon and his six other hunters spotted a rather large herd of reindeers, the experienced hunter looked endlessly relieved.<p>

"\_Alright.\_ he began \_"we take off, get up high and dive on them. If nobody screws it up, we can bring back one reindeer each for the others.\_"

"\_Six doesn't sound enough, how many of these would we need to get everyone stuffed?" \_Dyner asked.

Macharon looked at him, and thought for a few moments before answering.

"\_At least three times more.\_ he finally said \_"But the other hunters are away as well, so there's just us.\_"

As the others gotten ready to take off, Dyner kept thinking about the sudden idea he had. When they were just about to begin, he quickly approached Macharon.

"\_I have an idea how to catch more. Did you see the forest with the frozen riverbed crossing it, a while back south?\_"

"\_I did.\_ Macharon replied slowly \_"What are you suggesting?\_"

Dyner swallowed tensely before beginning to describe his plan.

"\_If you and the others hide in the riverbed, I'll shepherd the whole herd right towards you, make them cross the riverbed more than once so you guys can get more chance of catching them.\_"

Macharon took a long look at the scrawny-looking dragon, who was more than ungraceful on the ground and even smaller than his age would justify... but he had seen him flying before.

"\_Are you sure you can pull this off?\_"

"\_Trust me, you won't regret it.\_ Dyner grinned \_"And if it doesn't work out as much as we want, we can still try diving on them and catch a few ones gone astray.\_"

"\_This better work out.\_ Macharon shook his head. \_"Alright fellows, change of plan.\_"

As the hunters took up positions in the riverbed, Dyner took off as well, rapidly climbing towards the thick white clouds high above. He reached the clouds and disappeared, going below cloud level only for moments to check his course. Once he was above the herd, he folded his wings and began to dive.

The moment the reindeers heard the sharp whistling sound of a charging Night Fury, they all looked to the sky in terror. But before they could scatter into all directions, Dyner shot a few precisely aimed, low-powered fireballs a bit north of the herd. They naturally

began to flee towards the opposite direction " which happened to be the direction of the forest where Macharon and the others were waiting for them.

He just circled above them, and shot a few motivating fireballs to keep them going where he wanted them, until they entered the forest.

"\_This is where the fun begins."\_ Dyner laughed, and kept grinning as he quickly descended and threw himself after the prey, into the forest of towering pine trees.

Macharon stuck his head out of the riverbed when he began to hear the hooves barraging the snowy ground, and the sight made his jaw drop. He saw dozens of reindeers desperately running from Dyner, who flew through the thick maze of trees not only with astounding speed, but with dizzying manoeuvres to avoid collision. One tiny mistake would break his wing or even worse, but he kept spinning, twisting and turning, wingtips narrowly touching the snow sometimes. Not only did he continue circling around the herd, but he even found split-seconds to let loose fireballs, constantly directing the herd towards them.

"\_Here they come!\_" Macharon roared through the blasts, and as soon as the first few deer began to jump over the riverbed, the five Night Furies below them jumped into action, aiming at their throats with their talons and fangs. One after another, they caught a deer, pulled them down, finished it with a quick blow and went for another one.

By the time Mach rose up from the carcass of his fifth prey, his ears met complete silence. The constant shaking of the ground caused by the myriad of hooves disappeared, just as the blasts of Dyner's fireballs. As Mach looked over his four other companions, he saw his own puzzlement mirroring on their faces, but what's more important, he counted almost two dozen fallen reindeers!

With loud wing beats, and vivid wheezing, Dyner landed behind him. The young Night Fury kept panting for a while, before he finally managed to blurt out a question.

"\_So...? How was it?"\_

Macharon laughed heartily as he hugged the hyperventilating and physically drained youngling with a wing.

"\_All I'm going to say is that I no longer doubt Lenhardt's sanity for letting you come with." \_the older dragon grinned. While he said this, the other four dragons all gathered around them, giving appreciative nods, and agreeing smiles. \_"That was crazy just to watch. Why were you starving again?"\_

"\_I'm okay with chasing things..." Dyner grinned back "I'm just not so good at catching them. Holy shit, that was fun."\_

"\_Yeah, and good teamwork."\_ Mach nodded \_"I never thought I'd be saying this again, but we're going to need help carrying all this back."\_

\* \* \*

><p>That night, the whole clan was feasting on reindeer meat and celebrating Macharon's hunting group, Dyner in particular. Once Macharon told the tale of how they got this much food, Dyner practically disappeared in the crowd of congratulating Night Furies. Lenny couldn't help but laugh at his awkward face, as he really did seem uncomfortable with so many dragons being around him.</p>

While Lenny was sitting atop of a small hill, looking down at the happily feasting crowd, he saw Ohrana approaching him. They both greeted each other with a nod, and as the dragoness sat down beside him, she spoke up:

"\_You have good eyes, Lenhardt.\_"

"\_I... do?"\_ Lenny asked in confusion.

"\_Of course.\_" She nodded "\_Not everyone would accept someone like Dyner into a clan, and a lot of us doubted the reason behind your decision. But despite the circumstances, you've managed to see the value in him, and gave him a chance to prove his worth.\_"

"\_Well..." Lenny began, a bit unsure what to say\_ "Now... at least we know he'll find his place among us.\_"

"\_Yes, he's settling in slowly but surely. Now we just need to work on that foul mouth of his.\_" Ohrana chuckled.

Lenny let out a short laugh too, as he looked up at the cloudy sky above... and the mountain range in the distance. He just hoped that his supposedly good eyes will find a place between those slopes tomorrow.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>AN: Alright my lovely readers, I hope this one was fun! Truth to be told, this chapter just kept getting bigger and bigger, until my editor fellas said that I'm taking in too many new things without talking them enough so... I chopped the chapter in half. Good news are, that the next installment is halfway done, I plan to upload it on next week! Stay tuned guys, time for me to make up for all the wait.\*</strong>

\*\*In the meantime, don't forget to tell me what you think. ;) Ratecommentreview!\*\*

\*\*I\*\*

\*\*I\*\*

\*\*I\*\*

\*\*V\*\*

\*\*p.s. ttt my fellas, your timing was most excellent. ;D\*\*

The next morning, Dyner agreed to help lead a small scout party to the mountains, to see if they could find a suitable place for fifty-odd Night Furies to settle down and start a new life. Lenny definitely wanted to see the place with his own eyes, First Guard Salkonyr insisted that he must accompany his young leader, and Dyner suggested that the fewer Night Furies go, the better their chances to stay undetected. They agreed that the three of them will go first, and should they find a suitable spot, the whole clan will slowly migrate there.

Lenny suspected that there might be another reason for Salkonyr's eagerness to quickly find a place to live. Faelynn, his mate, was only a couple days away from laying her egg, and carrying a fragile and precious burden from one place to the next was undesirable for the young life contained within.

More than understanding towards their situation, Lenny woke Dyner up early that morning and, as soon as the first beams light began to appear behind them, the trio was in the air, heading towards the towering heights ahead. He felt bad for leaving his mother behind again, she had been awfully protective and constantly concerned about him ever since Lohengrin departed to find Larany. But there were things he couldn't trust anyone else with, and she understood that she couldn't protect him forever.

They climbed higher and higher, almost fading into the thick layer of clouds above the peaks, but they constantly kept a watchful eye on the landscape below. They flew silently for a long while, up until Lenny began to see something strangely vast and blue behind the mountains.

Realization made Lenny's jaw drop. He thought the sea he'd seen previously was huge. Now, before him stretched a blue expanse that seemed unimaginably huge, he couldn't see any land bordering it in any directionâ€|

"\_Salkoâ€|" Lenny muttered.

"\_Yeah, I see it tooâ€|" He replied in a similar manner \_"I guess this is the 'ocean' Elder Ragnar mentioned."\_

"\_Incredible.\_" Lenny mumbled. Apparently Dyner caught that, as he turned his head to grin at the two Furies behind him. He was probably used to the view of the ocean already, and he couldn't miss the opportunity to enjoy the dumbstruck expressions of his companions.

"\_We're getting near, guys!" \_He announced and with an obviously show-off, upside-down turn, he went into a steep dive.

As Lenny struggled to keep up with the older dragon's manoeuvres, he concluded that Dyner was as skilled and agile in the air, as he was ungraceful and clumsy on the ground. Using the momentum they've gained in the dive, the three dragons levelled out, then overtook the peaks with a gentle and effortless climb and entered into a crescent-shaped valley.

The valley was bordered by the ocean from the west, and was encircled by mountains of varying height from every other direction. The middle

of it was a fairly large stretch of mostly flat land, dotted by patches of pinewood and currently frozen ponds. Then the land got gradually steeper, turning into rocky mountainsides with patches of bushes, mossy stone plateaus, and tiny brooks that fed a somewhat larger creek, which rolled down the mountainside towards the sea. Lenny could also spot the mouths of several caverns in the mountainside, indicating that there might be a whole network of caves around there. The three dragons began a gradual downwards spiral, until they gently touched down in the knee-high snow near the pine forest.

"So, what do you think?" \_Dyner asked them.

Lenny took another good look around, before slowly answering:

"It'sâ€ perfect. The sea's full of fish, there's plenty of shelter, and the creek up there looks drinkable, so we'd have pretty much anything we needâ€ Salko?"

"I agree." the older dragon nodded "The mountains also offer great cover against anything coming from the mainland, and the peaks offer good lookout posts so nothing could surprise us again."

"True." Lenny agreed "I say we go and check out the mountainside, take a look at the caves before going back to the others, but so farâ€ suddenly a disturbed expression appeared on Salkonyr's face, so Lenny stopped immediately. The Guard was eyeing the forest and the undergrowth a few steps away from them.

"What's wrong?" Dyner asked.

Salkonyr's eyes narrowed and head tilted to side a bit as he continued to examine the forest.

"I think I've seen-"

In that moment, the quiet peace of the snow-covered forest shattered into pieces, as a well-aimed fireball struck the ground between the three of them, its shockwave knocking everyone off balance. Lenny rolled in the snow to stand up again, but in a moment's notice, there was someone right in front of him. He dodged the first swipe of a paw, but he didn't see the powerful kick coming upwards.

He took a big hit on the chin and saw stars for a moment as his head snapped upwards. The power of the strike sent him tumbling backwards, and he fell on his back with wings sprawled uselessly in the snow. Struggling to see through the fiery pain and world-spinning dizziness, he at least managed to identify his attacker.

It was a female Night Fury.

She stepped forward and placed a forepaw on his chest.

"I would stay down if I were you." she snarled, applying some more pressure on him with her paw.

Lenny swallowed, and peeked to the side, trying to figure out what's going on with his companions. Dyner was in a very similar position, but he was crushed into the snow by a dragon twice as big as he was.

Salkonyr roared as he threw one of his opponents back into the forest, but there were two other Night Furies clinging on to him, all roaring and clawing him viciously.

"\_Tell him to quit resisting or he'll get seriously hurt.\_" The dragoness ordered, addressing Lenny. Lenny swallowed tensely again, and decided to comply.

"\_Salko, STAND DOWN!\_" he roared.

Salkonyr took a surprised look at him, and the moment of pause was just enough for three attacking Night Furies to jump him, squashing him into the snow as well.

Now that all three of them were subdued, Lenny's mind filled with panicky thoughts and rushed ideas about how to get out of this mess.

"\_The little bastard set us up!\_" Salkonyr groaned under the weight of three Night Furies.

"\_NO!\_" Dyner roared desperately \_"I have no idea who they--"

"\_All of you, shut up!\_" the dragoness yelled. \_"You are trespassers of the territory of Clan Maedros. The three of you will now be taken to our Leader for questioning. Until that happens, I don't want to hear a single whiff from any of you!\_"

"\_Wait! We-\_" Lenny abruptly stopped as he felt a claw pressing against his throat.

"\_I'll say this only once.\_" the dragoness leaned very close to him, until Lenny could only see her threatening eyes \_"Do not test my patience.\_"

Lenny took a sharp breath, but stayed completely quiet. The dragoness seemed to be content with this answer, and she backed away a bit, allowing him to stand up.

"Follow me and no more violence will be necessary." she stated "If you try to make a run for it, we'll hunt you down and take you to our Leader by force."

Lenny just nodded, signalling his understanding. As he took a look at his two companions, and saw that they were mostly unharmed, the tight feeling in his chest loosened a bit. But only a tiny bit, because he knew if the Leader of this Clan Maedros didn't show any understanding towards their situation, they were in mortal danger.

\* \* \*

><p>The group of Night Furies flew northwards in an uneasy silence. The bossy female led the way, Lenhardt followed second. Behind them were Salkonyr and Dyner, closely escorted by four other Night Furies, who looked eager to discipline any deviation from their flying course. Lenny grit his teeth as he hastily tried to put together a speech in his head, in order to try convincing the local clan leader of their harmless intentions. Night Fury clans lived quite a distance from each other, partially because there were so few of them, and to minimize the chances of conflict over territory and food.</p>

As his sudden panic quieted down and had a chance to think things over, Lenny realized that there's probably a good chance that this clan won't harm him. But they have every right to deny them access to their territory, and that would possibly be even worse. If Clan Toemnir can't find refuge in these mountains, they have really nowhere else to go. They might have to face starvation and persecution. He cannot allow that to happen.

Everyone in his clan trusted him to lead them to safety. He will not betray that trust.

He took a sharp breath in his anxiousness, as they began to descend. The mountain range below them was immensely huge, stretching out from south to north for as far the eye can see. Now they were entering a wide canyon, bordered by tall and very steep rock walls. Lenny saw beautiful waterfalls going down into the canyon, carrying the water of quick mountain brooks flowing from hot springs. As they flew even lower, he noticed crevices in the rock, where he suspected the dragons were living. After a few minutes, they arrived at a particularly wide cave mouth, and landed on the flat, nature-formed rocky terrace in front of it.

The female quickly turned towards Salkonyr.

"\_You head inside, and wait for our Leader to arrive. Your companions can wait here."\_

The dragoness made the completely logical assumption that because Salkonyr was by far the biggest and oldest of the three trespassers, he might be the leader among the three. Salko looked defiantly in her eyes, and stated:

"\_I'm not the one to talk on behalf of all of us." \_

He took a meaningful look at Lenny beside him, who stepped forward. The dragoness also looked at Lenny, then back to Salkonyr with an outraged look on her face.

"\_I do NOT appreciate your humour!"\_

Lenhardt decided he'd had enough of this. He opened his wings slightly and straightened up, trying to appear as imperious as possible before he loudly announced:

"\_I am Lenhardt, son of Lohengrin, acting leader of Clan Toemnir! I led my clan through fear and desperation to find a safe place. You will stop treating us like filth between your claws, and show me the way to your leader, now!" \_

The enormous Night Fury who subdued Dyner roared out:

"\_You will not talk to her like that, you son of a-"

In a fraction of a second, Salkonyr appeared in front of him, pressing claws against his throat.

"\_You do NOT want to finish that sentence."\_ whispered quietly, staring into his eyes menacingly.

"\_I don't like where this is going..." \_Dyner murmured with ears flattening against his head, he tried to make himself as small as possible. Lenny was sure a fight is going to break out in seconds, whenâ€œ|

"\_ENOUGH! "\_

Everyone winced and turned towards where the booming roar came from. They saw a huge and very strict-looking Night Fury staring down at them from a rocky path. He jumped off and landed elegantly with two huge beats of his enormous wings. It was enough to take one look at him, and Lenny instantly knew who made the calls here.

"\_My Leader, we've caught these trespassers in Faelhold Vale." \_ one of the Night Furies said.

"\_We are not-\_ Lenny tried to speak, but the Leader interrupted him immediately.

"\_Silence. I will hear you out when it's due."\_ he looked back to the dragon who spoke before, and he continued his report.

"\_They made little resistanceâ€œ| "\_

Salkonyr growled, but refrained from saying anything.

"â€œ| \_And obediently followed us here. This oneâ€œ| " \_he pointed at Lenny with his nose "\_â€œ|claims to be the advocate of their group." \_

The leader looked into Lenny's eyes, who resisted the urge to shudder under the weight of his glare. The face the leader made reminded Lenny of his father's, when he was about to unveil one of Lenny's goofy lies he made up to cover the mischief he did the other day. When he was younger, he'd seen that stare many times.

But this time he had nothing to hide, so he withstood the Leader's look. After a few moments, his strict expression loosened somewhat, and he spoke up in a slightly apologetic manner.

"\_Please excuse us for being overly suspicious, but with all the worrisome things \_\_that have\_\_happened\_\_ around our borders for almost a year, we cannot be cautious enough." \_

"\_We don't mind."\_ Lenny replied. Dyner coughed a bit, earning a smack to the back from Salko immediately. \_"I would like to assure you that we mean no harm to \_\_you or\_\_ your clan. I am Lenhardt, son of Lohengrin. My companions are Salkonyr, son of Varanyr, and Dyner, son of Teague. We are from Clan Toemnir." \_

"\_I am Aegnor, son of Aegras, Leader and sworn protector of Clan Maedros." \_ \_the Leader introduced\_ himself \_"And as long as you keep your honest intentions, you three are welcome to stay for a while." \_ He looked at the young dragoness before continuing: \_"Please take our guests to a place when they can rest, and arrange something to eat for them while I talk with Lenhardt. Also, send for my Third Guard, I'm going to need him." \_

"\_Yes, Father." \_she nodded, and signalled Dyner and Salko to follow her. Lenny also gave her a surprised look. If she's the Leader's

daughter, then her bossy behaviour is somewhat explained. However, she refused to return Lenny's glare as she walked away.

Aegnor sat down in front of Lenny, curling his tail around his legs, and Lenny did the same before looking up at him.

"\_I didn't expect to find anyone in these mountains" Lenny began  
\_"but now that we've met, I would like to ask for your help. My whole clan is in great need because our home has been destroyed, and we've been trying to find a place to live for months."\_

"\_I believe there is quite a story behind a whole clan's migration. I would like to hear it if you don't mind."\_

So Lenny began to explain what happened to Clan Toemnir during the last few weeks in detail. He told about how the unknown humans attacked them without warning or any specific reason, how they fled from their home valley, how his father decided to take the clan to the west. He talked about the journey they've had, explained why his father left the clan, leaving the leadership to him, and he also told Aegnor about the humans he saw, friendly and unfriendly alike.

The older dragon listened to his story with intense attention, but never interrupted Lenny. By the time the young dragon had finished the tale, he felt his mouth running dry. Aegnor broke eye contact with him, and stared forward, seemingly deep inside his own thoughts.

"\_Now this is a great deal of dire news." he finally began \_"Ancient laws and common courtesy both demands me to render whatever assistance I can, and I truly feel sorry for what happened to you. But you must understand that I cannot risk my own clan's safety, not even for yours. If I decide to split my territory with you by the ratio of the population of our clans, that will inevitably lead to backlashes, jealousy, and even fights. Night Fury clans are not meant to live right next to each other."\_

Lenny listened to this with icy dread rising in his stomach.

"\_However."\_ Aegnor continued, \_"As I've said, I would like to help you. My proposition is this: we offer temporary shelter to those in your clan who are not fit for prolonged flights: Elders, younglings, egg-expecting mothers, injured, sick. So you, with the majority of your Guards and Hunters, can locate a new home for your clan without so much to worry about."\_

"\_But where else could we possibly find a home?" Lenny asked quietly.

Aegnor swallowed in uneasiness before answering:

"\_Further down south, over the narrow sea, there's a huge stretch of land. I would suggest start searching there."\_

Lenny stared down at his forepaws. While this offer was generous, his father and he had promised a safe haven in these mountains. How could he go back to the clan and tell them that there are more weeks of flying and searching ahead of them, possibly even months? How could he ask families to split up to continue the endless flying? His

thoughts wandered upon Salko and Faelynn, who were expecting the arrival of their first egg in just a couple of daysâ€|. He didn't want to see Salkonyr's face when he told him he has to miss the hatching of his first son or daughterâ€|. No. He cannot accept this.

Howeverâ€|

"\_Leader Aegnor, may I ask how big your territory is?"\_

"\_The borders are roughly two days of flight south and north from here, the eastern border is half a day away."\_ He answered slowly.

"I see. I noticed that your clan is not particularly numerous, am I right?"

Now this was just a guess based on suspicion. Lenny honestly believed in Dyner's words when he said he didn't know this area was occupied. Which means the last time he was on this clan's territory, the border patrols missed him entirely. That could happen because they have too much ground to cover with too few dragons.

"\_There are thirty-four of us."\_ Aegnor said with a darkening tone  
\_"But if you're thinking about-"\_

"\_I'm thinking about merging our clans together."\_ Lenny said quickly.

That sentence sounded so absurd for his ears, Aegnor couldn't do anything other than blink for a few seconds.

"\_Whâ€| what?"\_ he blurted when he managed to find his voice again.

"\_You yourself said that two clans aren't meant to live right next to each other."\_ Lenny pressed, determined to make his sudden idea likable \_"Clan Toemnir has fifty-one dragons at the moment. You lack the numbers to fill your territory, while we lack territory at all. I don't see why we couldn't live together, from a certain point of view, my clan is just a group of Striders."\_

"\_Striders do not come in groups."\_ Aegnor countered \_"And how do you imagine this union of clans? I have never heard of something like this before in my life."\_

"\_The dragons of Clan Toemnir all follow my leadâ€|" Lenny said slowly \_"and I am willing to follow yours. But I think we will have a lot of time to figure out an exact chain of hierarchy and \_\_succession line\_\_â€| or whatever else you might be worried about. I'm just a temporary replacement of my father, but I am sure he would approve my decision. And when he comes back, he will keep himself to the deal we have, or make a new one with you. In the worst case scenario, we leave."\_

"\_Hmm. This is an interesting offer you have come up withâ€| and you're making me face a huge dilemma." \_Aegnor sighed \_"I know my clan. They would welcome your kin if I asked themâ€| Upon hearing your story, they would feel the need to help anywhere they could. But most of us just look at the present, instead of taking possible

future difficulties into accountâ€|" \_Aegnor stopped again to think for a few moments \_"Howeverâ€| I see how much all of us can gain out of thisâ€| I view it as mutually beneficial."\_ Aegnor began to smile and the respect in his tone seemed a bit less obligatory more genuine from now on. \_"Alright then. If you go back to your clan, tell them this idea and they're willing to join us here, I will have no reservations."\_

Lenhardt suddenly felt a ton of weight rolling off his shoulders, and he couldn't help but smile back.

"\_I don't have the words to say how grateful I am, and how grateful all of us will be."\_

Moments later, a rather broad and strong-looking Night Fury appeared on the rocky path as he approached them.

"\_Have you summoned me, my Leader?"\_ he asked politely, taking a curious look at Lenny.

"\_Yes."\_ Aegnor nodded \_"I would like you to escort our guest back to his own when he's ready to leave. Third Guard Altarem, this is Lenhardt, son of Lohengrin of Clan Toemnir."\_

The dragon froze mid-step, his eyes went wide and jaw dropped.

"\_Is your father Lohengrin, son of Siegfried?"\_ he asked Lenny.

"\_Yesâ€|" he said in complete surprise \_"You know him?"\_

"\_We grew up together. I was born in Toemnir valley as well, but decided to be a Strider when I reached adulthoodâ€| Butâ€| by Wotahn's fiery breath, what are you doing here?"\_

\* \* \*

><p>The flight back home was probably the most uncomfortable couple of hours Lenny has ever spent in the air. Altarem was eager for news, but when Lenny told the story of their exile for the second time this day, he went awfully silent. So the four dragons flew wordlessly towards the forest Clan Toemnir was hiding, and arrived just before sunset.</p>

As soon as they touched down at the edge of the woods, Lyara and Faelynn both rushed out to meet them. Lenny felt even worse for a moment, when he saw his mother's tearful eyes and heard her shaky tone.

"\_You're half a day late!"\_ she whispered half-relieved and half-angrily, as she nuzzled Lenny's forehead.

"\_Sorry, mom."\_ Lenny whispered back, licking his mother's face. \_"We've met a few... unexpected friends. I have some huge news for everyone."\_

Lyara looked up to stare at the fourth dragon, who just tilted his head and smiled at the family scene.

"\_It's good to see you again, Lya."\_ he spoke up, and Lyara's eyes

went wide with realization.

"\_Al... Altarem? Is that really you?"\_

"\_In the scales." \_The huge dragon smiled at her. Upon hearing this, Faelynn unfurled herself from Salkonyr's hug.

"\_Al? It's so great to see you're doing well!"\_

"\_I can't complain, although you're doing even better than I, if my eyes are right." \_

Faelynn only answered with a blushing smirk, and looked back at her sizable belly.

"\_Altarem came back with us as a representative of his clan."\_ Lenny explained \_"Let's gather the others, I have interesting news for all of them." \_

Lenny, Lyara, Salko, Faelynn, Dyner and Altarem all walked back into the forest, and within a short while, all of Clan Toemnir was sitting in front of Lenhardt. Needless to say, the attention of everyone made him quite uneasy, but nonetheless he managed to tell the clan about the territory they found in the western mountains, and about the clan which lives in it.

Now came the tough part, explaining why they should join with the other clan. Night Fury clans always took pride in their identity, the culture and traditions of their own clan. That's why all accepted adult clan members wore the symbol of their respective clans on their necks. Giving up the identity of their forefathers is definitely not easy, but Lenny was sure everyone will get over it sooner or later. The question of the leadership was even more problematic.

Lohengrin had the complete trust of the whole clan. Lenhardt not as much, but as time went, the dragons were getting accustomed to him, and some of his actions were beginning to earn some respect for him as well. But to put their fate in the paws of someone completely unknown?

This was the point when Lenny silently praised Aegnor for his foresight, sending Altarem with them proved to be an invaluable decision. He called Altarem up next to him, and he spent a good amount of time, telling the others his own experiences with Clan Maedros and its Leader. And because Altarem was born in Toemnir Valley as well, his opinion was not entirely foreign. He tirelessly answered any and all concerns brought up, and not only told them why Leader Aegnor earned his respect, he also told about his experiences with other prominent members of the clan, and about the land they will be calling home.

The discussion went on for well into the night, until they eventually agreed to go, and take their chances with the new clan. As Lenny followed the others to get some sleep before tomorrow's final flight, he couldn't help but notice Altarem getting hugged by two older Night Furies, and all three of them were quietly weeping.

"\_I guess someone's really happy to see Altarem again." \_Lenny whispered curiously to his mother. Lyara stopped for a moment to follow his son's glare, then swallowed and went on.

"\_Those are his parents.\_" She explained quietly, with a hint of sadness in her voice \_"Altarem's older brother was a Guard as well, he fell during the attack on the valley. After losing both of their sons, I think they're just happy to have one back."\_

"\_So many things went wrong during the last couple monthsâ€|" Lenny mumbled with a clenching throat.

"\_Indeed.\_" Lyara said \_"But from now on, many things are going to change for the better, if even half of what Altarem said is true. And in the end, that's what counts. Finally we'll be able to rest, and regenerate."\_

\* \* \*

><p>The next day would find itself to be very significant in the history of both clans, as the Night Furies of Toemnir Valley slowly arrived in the Gorge of Maedros. As Lenny remembered, it felt unbelievably awkward at first; nobody from either side really knew what to say or how to behave... But slowly, very slowly things started to warm up. Members of both clans slowly began to mingle and chat, offering food and showing the newcomers around. Lenny knew that getting comfortable with living together was going to be a long process, but thankfully, there were already promising signs.</p>

The next couple of days flew by quickly for Lenhardt, he and Aegnor had an immense amount of organizing and planning work to do. The two clans used to have completely different ways to hunt and patrol territory, so Lenny and Aegnor first gathered all higher ranking Guards and Hunters from both clans, flew around the vast homeland of Clan Maedros, inspecting hunting grounds, measuring borders to patrol, then settled down to work out a system which works the most efficiently with the number of dragons they have.

During these prolonged organising sessions, Lenny let Aegnor take the lead, as he knew very little about these matters, compared to the older dragon.

As days went by, Lenny became relieved as he noticed that the two clans were getting along rather well, seemingly nobody had problems with anyone. Nobody, except for Aegnor's daughter, Nienor. Her behaviour was something of a mystery for Lenhardt. He had a distinct feeling that she was purposefully avoiding him, and even at those rare occasions when they've met, he never got more than a scornful glare from her, and he had no idea why.

This was her twentieth winter, so she was older than him, although there wasn't much of a difference in size between them. As Lenny tried to observe her from a distance, he was astounded by the amount of work she's doing for both clans. She kept accompanying Guards on patrol duty, she had no problems with hunting together with Toemnir dragons, and Lenny even saw her bringing some extra food to Faelynn. She was polite and decent with everyone, and she was rapidly growing popular among the newcomer dragons â€" and Lenny now could completely understand why her clan respects her so much. Figuring that being on the bad side of a dragoness like her would be bad, he thought it would be a good idea to approach her and try to clear up any possible misunderstandings that may be there between them. When he asked Dyner and Wyren, both of them said it's a terrible idea, but he decided to

give it a try anyway.

"\_Uhm... hi!"\_

This was a rare moment; he managed to catch her alone, right after she finished eating from a pile of fish. She looked at him.

"\_Hi.\_" she greeted back with the sound of absolute disinterest. Lenny swallowed nervously as he felt his stomach tighten.

"\_Err..."\_

"\_What do you want?"\_

"\_I... wanted to.... I'd like to ask if you... have a problem with me."\_ Lenny stuttered, tail nervously lashing left and right.

Nienor stepped in front of him, and stared into his eyes. Their noses were like half a step away from each other. Lenny's first thought was how beautiful those dark pine-green eyes are... and his second thought was with that angry glare, he's in for some trouble.

"\_Now that you ask, I do have a slight problem with you.\_" she began in a mocking tone \_"you're a spoiled, good-for-nothing brat, who's got elevated to a Leader's position by his father's fame."\_

Lenny's jaw dropped.

"\_What?!"\_

"\_You heard right. I've been watching your behaviour since you first arrived. You're the most lazy, pathetic, sad excuse for a Leader I've ever seen. So you'd better stop being a liability and start pulling your own weight in the life of our Clan, then I'll consider acknowledging your existence.\_"

She stuck her nose up and walked past Lenny, who was completely speechless. After a few moments, he managed to cry out the only thing he could in his defence:

"\_But I'm trying my best!"\_

She looked back at him, but now her look was burning with despise.

"\_You're more pathetic than I thought.\_"

With that, she opened her wings and leapt into the air, leaving Lenny behind, who felt utterly and completely destroyed inside. He let out a sigh, and sat down, when he heard someone talking to him from behind.

"\_Well, that didn't work.\_" Dyner said in a chatting tone as he and Wyren appeared behind a hill, and waked up beside Lenny.

"\_Don't worry, pal, she doesn't really know you, you'll prove her wrong.\_" Wyren added \_"It's not like her opinion's so special anyway. I mean, okay, she's a great huntress, a great fighter, selfless, gets along with everyone, smokin' hot-\_"

"\_Ren, shut up.\_" Lenny sighed tiredly. \_"She at least has a point. I already felt I'm at a disadvantage compared to even her, let alone Aegnor... But I think I figured out what I'm gonna do.\_"

"\_You did?"\_ Dyner asked.

"\_Yep. If things were normal, Dad would teach me anything I need. But he's not around, so I'm gonna find someone else whom I can learn from.\_" Lenny explained. \_"I'm not exactly the most majestic Leader of all times, I never thought I was. But now I think I should really begin to work towards becoming something more.\_"

"\_Good idea.\_" Wyren nodded, but began to grin \_"Too bad you had to get burned to figure it out.\_"

"\_More like tossed into a raging inferno.\_" Lenny grinned back and shook his head. \_"But yeah.\_"

\* \* \*

><p>From the day of his catastrophic effort to talk to Nienor, Lenny spent every free hour he had with either Salkonyr, who gave him fighting lessons, his mother, who kept polishing his hunting skills, or with Elder Ragnar, who had extensive knowledge about such hardly understandable matters like oratorical skills, multiple-perspective thinking, practice of empathy and other things Lenny didn't even know existed. He spent so much time learning the only thing he used his cave for was sleeping, always returning well after sunset, and heading out just before dawn.</p>

He took the hunting sessions well; the lessons of Elder Ragnar however were mind-blowingly tiresome. The toughest was Salkonyr's combat training, especially because Lenny specifically asked him not to hold himself back. Their sparring matches constantly ended up with him getting mowed into the snow, rocks, mud, or whatever surface was available. But to Salko's credit, he took a great deal of time describing and showing him different stances and manoeuvres, as well as teaching him where, how and with how much force he should hit an opponent.

They were walking together back to their caves in the chilly winter evening, talking about the events of a particularly exhausting afternoon.

"\_We began just a few days ago, but you're picking things up fast.\_" Salkonyr commented.

"\_You think so?"\_ Lenny asked tiredly.

"\_Of course.\_" the older dragon nodded \_"You're maintaining your balance noticeably better.\_"

"\_You still knock me down in like five seconds.\_"

"\_That's because I began this whole thing just a bit before your father hatched.\_" Salkonyr chuckled. With his eighty-two years, he was far from being considered 'old', but he was the most experienced Guard remaining, after their clan left Toemnir valley.

As they arrived at the mouth of Salkonyr's cave, he asked:

"\_I think your mother's also visiting, why don't you come in?"\_

"\_Uhm... yeah, sure why not."\_ Lenny followed Salko inside his rather spacious cave. The Gorge was full of caves like this, and most of them were uninhabited previously. This made the settling in of the Toemnir dragons easier, as everyone could choose a cave of their liking. Just after a few steps inside, Lenny could already feel the comfortable warmth coming from the bonfire in the traditional, hexagonally-carved fireplace. Inside the circle of light created by the fire, Faelynn and Lyara were lying opposite of each other, chatting quietly. Their ears perked up as they heard the two males stepping in, and they both turned to greet them.

After the first greetings and bumping heads with his mother, Lenny noticed that Faelynn was cradling something round and big between her forelegs.

"\_Is that the...?"\_ he asked, pointing at it with his nose.

"\_Yes, it's our daughter."\_ Faelynn smiled. "\_You haven't seen an egg before? Come, take a look.\_"

Lenny stepped closer to take a proper look at the egg. It was granite-grey, about three times longer and twice wider than his paw. A distinctive black pattern spiralled down from the top of it. Its outlook made it appear more like beautiful mineral, than a regular egg, Lenny was quite mesmerized by it.

"\_May I...?"\_ he asked, raising his forepaw a bit.

"\_Sure, just be careful.\_"

He very, \*\*very \*\*carefully placed a paw on the egg, applying zero pressure. The egg felt surprisingly warm under his touch.

"\_How do you know it's a girl?"\_ Lenny asked.

"\_See the pattern on the egg?"\_ Lyara pointed it with her nose \_ "When it's spiralling like that, it's going to be a girl. Your egg had horizontal, almost lightning-shaped marks on its shell.\_"

Suddenly, the egg twitched under his paw, and Lenny let out a surprised yelp as he jumped back, almost landing in the fire backside-first. Salko and Faelynn both jumped onto fours, and crouched down at the egg, which began to shake and tremor violently. Lenny wanted to step closer to get a better view, but his mother shook her head.

"\_This is their moment Lenny, and the hatchling must see her parents first. We watch from a distance.\_"

The egg continued shaking and cracking, and Lenny could hear the faint squeaks of a tiny little voice inside. After a few minutes, the egg suddenly burst into pieces, and a tiny black form rolled off it. She was covered with the gooey remains of the egg's interior, and pieces of eggshell, but Lenny couldn't miss the excitement on the little thing's face, as she looked around and flapped her tiny wings.

Finally, the little one's eyes found her mother's, and after a moment of silence, she let out a happy mew.

Tears of joy rolled down on Faelynn's cheeks as she gently curved her forelegs around her hatchling, and began to clear her with long, caring licks. Salkonyr lay down beside them and joined in the bathing, and the little hatchling purred happily in the crossfire of her parents' attention. Then she sneezed with a squeaky "ACHOO!" when her mother licked over her nose.

"\_How would you like to name her?"\_ Salkonyr asked in a tone so full of emotion Lenny hadn't heard before.

According to the old belief, naming someone before hatching brings bad luck.

"\_How about... Dallaryn?"\_

"\_I love it." \_

Lyara smiled, and signaled Lenny that it's time for them to leave. As they stepped outside the cave, she spoke up:

"\_I doubt they would notice us anytime soon, so I figured we'd better leave." \_

"\_Were we this small when we hatched?"\_ Lenny asked.

"\_Of course."\_ Lyara smiled \_"I'll remember that night forever. Your father was so nervous, he almost had a heart attack."\_

"\_Really?"\_ Lenny laughed, trying to imagine someone as calm and collected as his father in a panic \_"Why?"\_

"\_It's very rare to have two eggs. Your father was afraid that one of you might not turn out healthy. But both you and Nyssie hatched normally and right after the other. I don't think I've ever seen your father so relieved and happy before."\_ Lyara told him nostalgically.

"\_And now..."\_ Lenny began, deep in his thoughts \_"Dallaryn's the first one of us to hatch outside Toemnir valley."\_

"\_Indeed."\_ Lyara agreed \_"And if her birth is a sign... then I think it's the best sign we could possibly get about the future."\_

\* \* \*

><p><strong>AN: So guys, I hope you liked this latest installment of Lenny's misadventures, because you aren't going to see him for a while. The point of view is switching back to Lohengrin again, YAY! Or not...? Tell me what you think in that magic box below!  
:)\*\*

\*\*I\*\*

\*\*I\*\*

\*\*I\*\*

\* \*V\* \*

End  
file.